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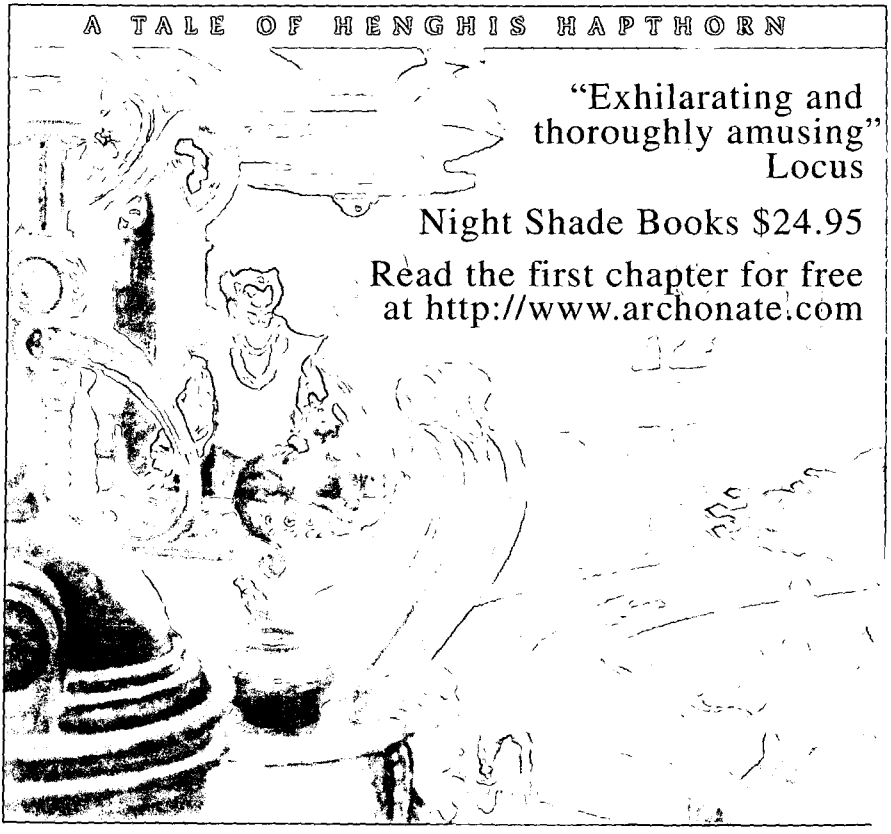

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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January • 58th Year of Publication

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In the four years since we published his story "Halfway House," Jeremy Minton has published stories in Aeon *and* The Third Alternative, *but the bulk of his creative work has gone into a novel. (He describes the effort as being akin to rowing across the Atlantic Ocean.)*

Of this new story, he says that it exists because "I had a rather nasty nightmare about being buried alive on the same day that I happened to hear a radio documentary about a parasite which does unusual things to shrimp. The question of exactly how *those input elements ended up as this story is left to the imagination of the reader."*

Your editor recommends instead that you let Mr. Minton do the imagining. Read on—

The Darkness Between

By Jeremy Minton

IN THE CRAMPED AND claustrophobic dark, I put my arms around Merrison and wished that I could kill him. We were lying side by side in a cold, stone tunnel which was less than two foot from floor to ceiling. There was no light but I was still intimately aware of the unforgiving granite no more than an inch from my face. Above that roof came half a mile or more of solid rock. From somewhere far off, I heard the relentless dripping of water.

I could feel the press of Merrison's gut against my chest, and it enraged me. Fat! How could he still be fat? We had been trapped in the tunnels for the best part of a month, eking out our existences on tasteless, watered-down rockfruit. Our bodies were turning into anatomical diagrams but Merrison still carried his fat around with him like a mute confession of a life made easy by other people's efforts.

He shifted against me, and something about our position put me in mind of how it must feel to lie down next to a woman. My empty stomach curdled with disgust and I cursed my own imagination. There was no way

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I wanted the image of that so-far-only-dreamed-of pleasure to be associated, however fleetingly, with a man as vile as Merrison.

I could feel Merrison's fingers move against my lips. I thought at first he was urging me to silence. Urging me! As if I was still a boy without brains enough to keep quiet in the dark. Then I realized there was a pattern to what he was doing. He was counting out a number on my face. One. Two. Three. It could only mean one thing, and it was a thing I didn't want to know. I groped around for his right ear, and tugged it. *Are you sure*? I tugged harder than I needed to, hoping it would hurt. If it did, he betrayed no sign. His fingers touched my skin in response.

Yes. Three knuckledusters, moving in a group.

We had learned to talk this way while we were moving in the tunnels, during those moments when visible gestures were useless and speech could get you killed.

How far? I asked.

One hundred yards, his fingers answered. *Down.*

It was the worst possible news. In the weeks that we had been trapped in the tunnels we had just about managed to hold our own against the knuckledusters, mainly because the beasts were intensely solitary and seemed even more antagonistic to their own kind than they were to everything else. The idea that they might be starting to move in teams was not a comforting one.

I pressed my ear to the ground, straining for some confirmation that Merrison was right. I listened for more than a minute, but heard nothing. It would have been comforting to believe that he had been mistaken but I did not believe it. For a man who never listened, Merrison had astonishingly good hearing. If he said there was something in the tunnels below us then there probably was.

I needed to find out. Although I was anxious to get back to our companions, the need to establish the truth of Merrison's news outweighed the need for speed. The people in The Hollow had already waited three days for the food we were bringing; they could survive for a few minutes longer.

We had passed a drop shaft a hundred or so yards back. I would hear more clearly from there. I signed for Merrison to wait, then tried to turn around and found that the bag was in my way. This was hardly a first: the

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bag had been causing trouble ever since we had loaded it up with rockfruit at the start of the previous day.

It was one more example of the cussedness of this place. The fruit which grew along the shores of Lightless Lake had kept us alive since we had fallen into the tunnels but, honestly, did it have to be so bulky, did it have to be so heavy and awkward to carry?

I moved the bag enough to get past. Truth to tell, I was none too keen to leave it. Over the last week, while our dwindling group had been holed up in The Hollow, I had been comparing the amount of rockfruit we had left with the portions that people were eating. After my contact with Merrison's belly I had a good idea where the difference had been going.

Something scraped between my leg and the ground. I reached down and felt the comforting weight of my brother's spear. For a moment I hesitated and then, reluctantly, began to loosen the straps that held it to my leg. This was an obvious necessity: the spear was strong and sturdy, but it would be precious little use against a trio of dusters. Conversely, the risk of accidentally alerting the beasts was too plain to ignore.

All the same, it was not easy to do. I hated the idea of Merrison laying his flabby foreigner's hands on something so personal to me. My brother, Buttress, had given me the spear just before Merrison and I had set off for Lightless Lake. Harsh words had passed between us, and I took his gift as a sign that he, like I, still hoped for a rapprochement.

I pushed the spear to the side of the tunnel and began to crawl, struggling as always to find that critical balance between quietness and speed. This tunnel, like all the others down here, was wide enough for two or three men to lie side by side, but the space between floor and ceiling was so narrow you could not even get up onto your hands and knees. The only way to move was to drag yourself along on your belly. I had become adept at this but lack of proper food had taken its toll on me: my arms shook when I moved.

It took several minutes to reach the edge of the drop shaft. I knew I had got there from the flow of cold air which rose up out of the depths. Tentatively, I traced the outline of the hole. I did it lightly: the edges of these shafts were sharp enough to cut skin.

I lay there and waited. In the absence of anything else to chew on, I chewed on my own hate. I thought about Merrison and wondered if I had

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always been destined to loathe him. I suspected that I had. In a sense I had hated him before I or any of our family had even met him. I had hated him because of what he was.

Merrison was a Magician. That was what they called him, although I had never seen him perform any magic unless you could count the stealing of my brother's wits and conscience, and the words he spouted sounded more like gibberish than wisdom. All through our journey from the sea port at Capeland to the mines in the Borvaine Mountains we had been hearing stories of Magicians and how they were turning the world upside down. Everywhere we went we heard the same things: tales of men with strange clothes and stranger voices; men who carried outlandish machines in their saddlebags and wild ideas in their heads; who outraged priests by talking heresy on the steps of their churches; who infuriated surgeons and scholars by deriding the knowledge they had worked so hard to acquire; who set the world alight by proving that their wild ideas *worked*.

It was clear to all of us that such men were not to be trusted and nobody, least of all my father, Grapple, was happy about the prospect of putting ourselves under their charge. But what choice did we have? If even one tenth of the tales were true then the machinery of the Magicians and the deep mines they had opened with it were offering chances of wealth that few of us had even dreamed of.

If it had just been a matter of money then we might have resisted temptation. We might have stayed in our own homes, not joined the thousands of others who were sailing and riding and tramping halfway 'round the world to swell the throng who labored in the mines. But the riches the Magicians had found were in the form of forizael, and that changed everything.

Forizael! Sweetest of gifts of our world. Bliss for the soul and joy for the senses, a taste that elevated man and raised him nearer God. Wars had been fought for it, kingdoms betrayed for it, princes had died for it. For us it was a sacred thing; its use lay at the heart of our oldest rituals. Amongst our people, a man who possessed a quantity of forizael would never lack for anything else. To gain it we were willing to endure hardship. We were willing to be led by foreigners and heretics.

Or so we told ourselves while we were still at home. Doubts had set

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in long before we reached the mountains, and they grew a hundredfold when we laid eyes on the vast encampment that stained the ground around the mouth of the mines. Dusk was falling. The Hawk Star shone alone in the sky, scoring the heavens with its ancient, rapid glide, but all thoughts of beauty were cast aside as we looked at the slag heaps and the squalid tents, the iron railroads stretching into the desert. There was not a man among us who did not quail at the sight. No one could look at what had been done to this land and believe that anything virtuous could grow out of such ruin.

It was the Magicians who had done this with their steam and iron engines. I hated them for it, but the hate had been abstract, theoretical. Since then, the things I had suffered at their hands had given me an infinite number of reasons to make it personal. I had seen people beaten by weariness, broken by carelessness. I had seen my father worn by useless rage, seen my brother seduced by lies. Most of all, I had seen the stupidity and indifference of this man, Merrison, and the trouble it had brought.

Merrison was meant to care for the organizing of rotas and the counting of men in and out of the tunnels, but his only interest was in tearing the heart out of the Earth and in forcing the rest of us ever deeper into unshored, unsafe workings. If he had listened to our warnings that there was peril in the ground, that the men who had gone into the dark and not come back had not met with natural ends, we would not be trapped here now.

He had been in charge of our work party as it toiled and sweated in the deepest of the mines. There had been twenty of us in the gallery when the earth-slip happened. We had been hacking away, heedless of the cracks and groans that rose up out of the dark. Then the ground had split beneath us and we had tumbled down the broken escarpment we could come to know — and curse — as Long Drop.

The Drop, we eventually discovered, was just one wall of our prison. Three days crawl to the South and East — it was Merrison who insisted on the directions, though how he could have known them was a mystery — you came to Lightless Lake, a vast, still pool of brackish water with clumps of rockfruit growing on its shores. Five days to the North the tunnels were rent by a sheer, deep fissure at the bottom of which a torrent clashed and clattered. We called this stream the Night Rush.

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In between these barriers the tunnels stretched, artificial and unfathomable. They ran for miles in all directions, always flat, always straight, always turning at right angles, except at one place toward the heart of the maze where the stark, sharp walls abruptly bowed into a large, egg-shaped depression. This was The Hollow, where the survivors of our group were holed up.

Days of hard crawling had convinced us that there was nothing else to be found. There was no way out, no road back to the sun. We were alone and trapped in the dark.

THE AIR in the drop shaft was chill and smelled of mold. I shuffled cautiously forward and felt it move like a cold breath on my face. Peering down, I could not tell if I was looking into a drop of one foot or a thousand. There was nothing to see and nothing to hear. Nothing, except...

There!

It was very faint. So faint I was amazed that Merrison had managed to hear it so much earlier. It was a sound like fingers, very many fingers, drumming upon stone. Echoes ran ahead of it, but not too far ahead. The duster was in its element: it was approaching fast. I felt a coldness that started in my feet and rose into my guts.

The first time we had encountered these creatures had been at the foot of Long Drop. We had been making a second attempt at climbing back to the human levels. We had not posted a guard, had not known there was anything to guard against. When the duster sprang on us out of the dark we had not known how to fight it. Three of us died that morning and another two were injured. Five out of twenty. Now I was alone with the useless Merrison, and all that was protecting us was thirty feet of drop shaft.

Light flowered abruptly in front of me. It was not as bright as a candle, but after so many days in the dark it felt like pepper being rubbed into my eyes. The light swelled, and the footsteps swelled beside it. The duster emerged from the darkness.

The first thing you noticed was how well it fitted the tunnel. Each segment of its softly glowing body was like a flattened lozenge, almost as wide as the passageway. Thin but powerful arms thrust out from the sides

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of its body. They were jointed so that they could push against either the walls or the floor to speed the beast on its way. There was not an inch of space between carapace and roof, but there was some clearance below. Knuckledusters ran with their bodies clear of the ground, leaving enough space for their claws to slash through the air.

I counted the segments. In spite of the noise, it was just a little specimen, only seven segments long. Dusters kill by running over your body and tearing it. The more legs you had attacking you, the worse your chances of survival. No duster was easy to handle, but a beast like this could be fended off with skill. Between ten and fifteen segments you might survive if you were exceptionally lucky. Anything more than that, forget it.

The duster's tail flashed past and the radiance swiftly faded. The fact that dusters glowed infuriated Merrison.

"It makes no sense," he'd protest. "The creatures are blind so light is no use to them. In fact, it works against them by making it easier for prey to escape."

"Not easy enough," my father had replied.

It was a few hours after our failed attempt on Long Drop. We had taken our dead and wounded and retreated to The Hollow, which was the nearest thing we had found to a defensible position. Lock, who had been nominated as our healer on the grounds that he was marginally less unqualified than any of the rest of us, was going around doing what he could to comfort those who were injured. In most cases this consisted of little more than making soothing noises. None of us was saying very much. We were in that dazed and fractured state when numbness gradually segues into shock. After what had happened that day, only a man like Merrison would have thought to use a word like *easy* in connection with the dusters.

Most normal men would have noted Grapple's anger and shut up, but Merrison had kept on muttering about how the dusters didn't make sense. For the rest of us the fact that they were killing us was a good enough reason to hate them but Merrison, I genuinely believed, would have put up with being eaten if the creatures would just stop offending his sense of order.

I thought about the Magician as I waited for the second duster. Of all the crimes he had committed, all the reasons he had given me to hate him,

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I thought that the greatest was the way he had stolen my brother from me. Buttress and I had always been close. That was why it felt like such a betrayal when I discovered how much he had fallen under Merrison's spell.

"How can you bear to listen to him?" I had demanded of my brother after a particularly asinine pronouncement from the overseer. "He doesn't even talk properly."

"He talks *differently*, Brand," Buttress replied, proffering the word with exaggerated patience.

But Buttress was wrong about this. Merrison was not just different. I had spoken to enough people from enough places in the world to recognize speech that was merely different. I'd seen folk who stumbled over simple words, folk who built their sentences back to front. Merrison rarely did either of these things. Instead, he spoke as if his throat had never been intended to produce proper speech and did so under sufferance. When the words came out they sounded strained, as if some part of his tongue was being bent in an unnatural direction.

It wasn't just the way he spoke, it was the things he chose to say. He was always brimming over with ideas and innovations, new ways of doing things. As if the old ways hadn't served men perfectly well since the time of the sages.

"And his name doesn't even *mean* anything," I'd added, sure that this would be enough to scupper the Magician's credibility. I had grown up surrounded by people whose names were a reminder that they were merely tools of the Creator, that their purpose in life was to raise the stones of His city. How could one expect to hear wisdom from a man whose name was just a meaningless jumble of syllables? I had expected my brother to understand this, but he just looked at me and said: "So?"

Things had grown worse after we fell into the tunnels. It had been my hope that since Merrison had been to blame for the disaster he might have had the grace to shut up. Instead, he seemed determined to impose himself upon us. He insisted that he alone possessed the skills to get us out of the tunnels. My father treated this assertion with the contempt it clearly deserved, but Buttress seemed willing to take the buffoon at his word. He even chose to speak against my father and in favor of Merrison when plans were being laid for how we would escape.

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I broke off from my musings and realized that some considerable time had passed while I waited at the top of the drop shaft. At least I thought it had. It was hard to judge when you were alone in the dark. No duster had appeared and I had just about convinced myself that Merrison must, for once, have been mistaken. Then I heard it. Drumming. Lots and lots of drumming.

It seemed like a lifetime before the duster finally appeared. It was indistinguishable from its predecessor, except that there was more of it. Much, much more. I counted forty-five segments before the tail came into view.

I watched it come. I watched it go. And for a long time afterward I listened to the echo of its retreating feet.

Something touched my leg. I almost shouted.

I waited for my heartbeat to slow down, then said: "Are you trying to scare me witless?"

"I'm sorry," said Merrison, not sounding it at all. "I didn't know how else to attract your attention."

"You could try making some noise when you move."

It was a stupid thing to say, and I knew it. I should have envied his silence, not resented it.

"What is it you want?" I said.

"I came to see if you were all right; you were absent a long time. Have they all gone by?"

"Both, not all. There were only two of them. But the last one was a monster. More than forty segments."

"More than — ? You're joking!"

"Is that the kind of thing I'd joke about? There were forty-five segments. I counted them."

There was a long silence, then he said, "I never dreamed that they could grow so big." He sounded like a man who had just received a death sentence. "Well, that's it, I guess. Now your father's going to *have* to move."

I swung my head toward him, even though this was pointless in the dark.

"What do you mean, *now* my father's going to have to move? My father always *intended* to move. The whole point of sending us back to

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Lightless Lake was to stock up with provisions for another attempt on the escarpment."

"Is that what you think he's doing, Brand? Is that what you truly believe?"

There was an intensity in Merrison's voice which I had never heard before. And something very curious was happening. In spite of the blackness, I was convinced that he was looking right at me. Looking at me and *seeing* me.

"Of course it's what I believe," I said. "What else would he be doing?"

"I don't know," said Merrison. "You know him better than I. But does he not look to you like a man who's taken one blow too many, lost one friend too many? Does he not look like a man who would rather crouch in a corner than take the risk of losing anyone else?"

"No he doesn't!" I seethed, wishing I could shout at the top of my lungs, shout loud enough to drown out my own doubt.

"No need to lose your temper. I'm not asserting anything. All I'm doing is asking you some questions."

"I don't want to hear them," I said.

"I can see that. I don't suppose you'll want to hear what I'm going to say next, either. We have to change our route home."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"We can't afford to go back the way we came. It's going to take too long, especially dragging the bag. It was different on the way out: it was worth the extra time to cut the risk of running into dusters. But if a forty-five segment duster decides to visit The Hollow, nobody there is going to stand a chance. We have to get back and get them to move out. That means going down this drop shaft."

It went against the grain to be agreeing with Merrison, but I could see the strength of his argument. There was one thing I didn't understand though.

"What makes you think that going that way will be any quicker than going back the way we came? Or any riskier, come to that?"

"Because the tunnel we are in is a back-route, a minor tributary, while the tunnel below is the main arterial route from Lightless Lake to the North side of the system. That means it's heavily traveled. The good news is that we don't need to be on it very long. By my reckoning, we have about

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forty-five minutes hard crawling, then we'll hit a lateral that will take us back to The Hollow."

"How do you know all this stuff?" I said.

"I have a knack for geography, Brand. Even in a place like this I generally know where I am and where other things are in relation to me. I'd have thought you'd have noticed by now. Or have you been too busy despising me to spot that I've been keeping you alive?"

I didn't answer that. We groped around the inside of the drop shaft until we located the ladder. I say ladder, but it was more like a series of grooves gouged into the side of the shaft. We had known it would be there because all of the shafts which we had encountered had possessed equivalent structures. The ladders were one more reminder that the tunnels had not been built with human needs in mind: the groves were too narrow and set too far apart. They were shaped specifically for the spatulate feet of knuckledusters.

There was also, we discovered, a more basic problem with the drop shaft. It was just a little bit too narrow for either of us to get into with a bag full of rockfruit on our backs. We spent half an hour or more demonstrating that it really would not go, and by the end we were both hot, irritable, and frustrated.

"This is ludicrous," I whispered, speaking to his ear through my cupped hands. I could have signed it, but sometimes you just need to speak. "If we carry on like this, it'll end up being slower than going the long way 'round."

"If we had some rope we could lower it down the shaft."

"Yes," I said, "but we don't. Have you any other suggestions?"

"We could drop the bag down the shaft."

"And smash half the fruit in the process."

Merrison said: "I know. You go down the ladder. I'll lower the bag onto your shoulders. You'll have to carry all the weight, but it shouldn't be for more than a couple of minutes. You should be able to manage."

I said: "I've got another idea. Why don't *you* climb into the shaft and I'll lower the bag onto *your* shoulders?"

"Because you're younger than me, fitter than me, and you have a better sense of balance."

Well, he was right about me being younger, but I was frankly dubious

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about the other parts of his claim. But I could already see that this was going to be one of those situations where no amount of arguing would have any effect on the outcome. The best thing to do was accept it.

After so long lying horizontal it was a blessing to stretch my limbs and stand up like a man. I was just beginning to enjoy it when I heard Merrison say: "Are you ready? I want to lower the bag."

"Let me get down a little further."

I wanted to be as far down as possible before having to take the weight. In spite of Merrison's assurances, I was not looking forward to the challenge. My limbs were weak from days without food, and the rungs of the ladder were slippery and difficult.

"It's coming down."

Oh, good, I thought. *I'm so pleased.*

The bag proved every bit as awkward, heavy, and difficult to balance as I'd feared. The rungs of the ladder were not evenly spaced, and to find the next one I had to wave my foot around, banging it against the rock until I found the gap. The first hint I had that all was not well was when my right foot reached down and failed to find a further indentation. I groped around, stretching as far as I could, but did not get any joy. I pulled my right foot back, positioning it on the step, and repeated the procedure with my left. That was when things really started to go wrong.

I had been carrying the bag longways on, which made it more unstable but meant that its weight was distributed directly down the line of my body. As I started to wave my leg around, the bag began to tip. I tried to correct the motion with my arm but it was hard to judge the force correctly. The bag swayed the other way and this time I was unable to stop it. It teetered, tottered, and fell backward.

I waited for the crash. It didn't come. I could still feel the weight on my neck although it was not as heavy as before. The bag had come to rest against the far side of the shaft. The combination of the wall and my neck was keeping it from falling, but a few experimental movements were enough to convince me that if I removed any part of my support, it would immediately fall.

"Merrison," I called, pitching my voice as low as I could.

"Yes," he said. "What is it?"

"The bag's stuck."

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"Oh Hell! What do you mean stuck?"

What part of "stuck" was he unable to understand? Quickly, I explained what had happened.

"Stay there," he said, helpfully. "I have an idea."

There was silence for a moment then, without warning, the bag began to move.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"I'm trying to shift the bag."

"What with?"

"Your spear."

I was just a split second too slow in realizing how bad an idea that might be.

"Which end are you poking it with?"

The question was already redundant. My brother had fashioned his spear with customary efficiency. Its blade was honed and sharpened and keen. And it was jabbing the top of the bag.

The fabric ripped. The bag was filled to bursting and a single gash was all it took to send rockfruit crashing down. A fruit the size of a skull smacked into my hand, and my grip was lost in an instant.

I tried to roll but the shape of the shaft was against me. I couldn't say for sure, but the bruises I collected and my own confused recollections both suggest that I managed to bounce off several walls before ending up face down along the line of the tunnel. I tried to get up and the roof smacked me hard on the back of the head as a reminder not to be stupid. I let out a groan and it seemed to help, so I decided to do it again. I saw no point in trying to be quiet. Echoes crashed and capered down the tunnel. They seemed to go on forever.

I dragged myself back to the drop shaft, started to sit up, and then thought: *What's the use*? The knuckleduster was coming. It knew I was there and it was coming to get me. I might just get to the top of the shaft, but that wouldn't buy me more than five seconds of life and it didn't seem worth the effort, even for the consolation of having Merrison die alongside me.

"Brand!" I could hear him calling. "Brand! Where the hell are you?"

I didn't answer. I was going to die and I didn't want to spend my final seconds engaged in a moronic conversation.

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"Brand, if you're at the bottom of the drop shaft, get out of the way. Get back down the tunnel. Move!"

I remained convinced that the situation was hopeless, but there was such urgency in his voice that I found myself obeying anyway. I put my feet against the wall and shoved. I was on my back now, the roof of the tunnel reflecting my own breath. I pressed my hands against the rock, pulled myself along, kicking at the walls for extra speed. I was moving away from danger but my pace was suicidally slow.

Light spilled into my eyes. The duster was at the end of the corridor. I could hear its footsteps like a fatal drum roll. It came so fast that it was just a blur of light. This, I thought, must be the view a man on a mountain sees in the seconds before an avalanche overwhelms him. At the very end, my courage failed. I closed my eyes and waited for oblivion.

THREE DAYS EARLIER, on the night that Merrison and I had been dispatched to Lightless Lake, the Magician had told us a tale. More than a week had passed since our second disastrous attempt to climb up the escarpment, and nobody seemed to have any idea what we were going to do next. A rockwood fire had been lit at the center of The Hollow and most of us were gathered around it, staring into its depths and trying to ignore the sounds of our kinsmen slowly dying. Nobody was doing very much. It was quiet enough for the soft hiss of the fire to be heard.

Rockwood is one of the mysteries of the tunnels, as strange in its way as the fruit that springs from its branches. It grows without light, and it burns very slowly, almost without smoke. Even in the confines of The Hollow, it left only the faintest fragrance on the air.

Lock was moving amongst the injured, doling out sips of water or a few sad fragments of our steadily diminishing stocks of rockfruit. His movements were desultory. In the morbid rockwood light he looked like a spider doing an inspection of its prey.

Only Buttress still showed signs of purpose. He sat by the entrance of The Hollow, with a small pile of rockwood and discarded rockfruit husks in front of him. He was using his knife to peel off long thin fibers from the husks, and when he had assembled enough of these, he would twist them into a rope that he would use to lash a few of the planks together.

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To try and take away the sting of the darkness, we told each other tales. This had become a habit during our time in The Hollow. To begin with we had been scrupulous about preserving silence for as much of the time as we could, but the longer we stayed in The Hollow the more it had come to seem, in a perverse sort of way, like home. We were comfortable there. We could talk to each other there. Each of us would speak in turn, breaking out of our thoughts and speaking words that we had learned by heart years back.

The tales we told were ones I had been hearing all my life but never before had they sounded so much like a requiem. When the last voice fell silent it was as if the breath had been stolen from the room.

That night, Buttress turned to Merrison and said: "And what of you, Master Magician? Do you have a story for us?"

"I know several," replied Merrison. "But I am no teller of tales."

"But you do know something," said Buttress. "Something that is new."

"It will be new to you, I think, although it is older than worlds."

That made no sense to me, but before I had a chance to protest, my brother had urged Merrison to begin.

"Far away," he said, "and long ago, before the men and women of this world had even learned to strike flame from dry kindling or balance one rock on top of another and call it a home, there were two empires. They were very old and rich and powerful, and each was convinced that *their* way of doing things was the best way.

"To the Gradyne, Might and Honor were the greatest virtues a person could possess. They raised vast armies and, with their aid, brought law and order to everyone around them. And this, they said, was good. The Illowain saw life differently. So differently that they did not even call themselves an empire, although their sphere of influence was just as vast as that of the Gradyne. They called themselves 'The Alliance' and elevated Choice and Freedom above all other things.

"For centuries, these Powers had grown and prospered, each ignorant of the other. But, inevitably, they came into contact, and it was not a happy experience. The more each Power learned of the other, the more they disliked what they heard. The Gradyne saw the Illowain as

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anarchists, wreckers of order. The Illowain saw the Empire as unthinking militarists whose only desire was to make everything the same as everything else.

"And so they came to blows. They fought with words to begin with. They competed in sport and trade and art. And when none of these alternatives to combat proved sufficient, they fought in earnest. They fought in secret; dirty little skirmishes over worthless territory, and then bigger, bloodier battles fought for Honor and Principle.

"And still it was not enough. Their mutual fear intensified, fed by accidents and mischances and by acts of deliberate malice. Cities burned, then continents, then worlds. Whole new disciplines in the arts of destruction were invented and deployed. Seas were drained and stars snuffed out. And by the time the men and women on both sides realized how far they had come, it was too late to pull back. Their only hopes were victory or death.

"And so they fought until death and killing was all they could remember. Until all that was left of the glory of their empires was the memory of how to throw rocks at each other. And in the end, even that was gone and nothing remained at all, except for rumors and stories in the mouths of those who came afterward, and except for the weapons that waited still, ready to rise up and slay a foe who no longer existed."

When Merrison stopped it took us a moment to realize that this was the end of the story. There was a sound of people shuffling. No one knew what to say. At length, Lock spoke. "And is there a point to your tale?"

Merrison said, "The story is true. If you're looking for a meaning you must find it for yourself."

More silence.

"To me," said Buttress, "the meaning is perfectly clear: those who will not change course when threatened by a thunderstorm will surely be soaked to the skin."

There was a stir around The Hollow as he said this. There was not a man present who did not recognize this as a challenge to our father. I wanted to leap to my feet, to speak in Grapple's defense, but a glance in his direction told me I should not. My father did not need anyone to fight his battles for him. Yet it was plain that this act of defiance cut him more

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deeply than any of the woes that had befallen us since we had come to this dreadful place.

He rubbed his chest as if his heart were hurting. "If you have something to say, then come out and say it. I am a foolish, weak old man and I lack the wits to see through such picturesque talk."

"I have never used any of those terms to describe you," said Buttress, and I wanted to take him by the throat and shout in his face, *No, but your every action tells us that you think them!* Still I held my peace. "But since you ask for plainness, I will give it. We cannot stay here. This place is fatal for us. Each hour we remain our state becomes more hopeless. This is the strongest, best defended ground we have discovered but it is not strong enough. Another attack will come, and even if we fend it off, more of us will be killed or injured. The next attack will be worse, and the next one after that, and so it will go until the last of us is taken."

For several moments Grapple moved his mouth but no words were able to emerge. In the shifting firelight he looked ancient and decrepit, a man with ground-glass in his joints. He raised his head to stare at my brother and I was close enough to see that his eyes were shining with tears.

"Have you anything useful to say? Or is your sole purpose to drown out every vestige of hope?"

"Yes, I have something to say," replied my brother. "I say that we must leave. We must quit while we still can."

At this it became impossible for me to hold my tongue any longer. "My brother has lost his wits in the darkness," I exclaimed. "*We must leave*, he says. Idiot! Lack-brain! What does he think we have been trying to do all this time?"

Buttress spread his palms toward me as if my rage was something he understood and welcomed. It was a gesture he had borrowed from Merrison, and it dismayed me more than any show of fury might have done.

"Whatever we have been *trying* to do, it is clear that we have not succeeded. We have made two attempts to climb Long Drop. Both have ended in failure. A third attempt is planned, but we are weaker now and the dusters are more numerous. There is every chance that this third assay will prove even more lethal than the rest. We must find another way."

"What way?" snapped Grapple.

Buttress replied: "The Night Rush is our only hope. Rockwood is light

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and strong." He held up one of the pieces of planking that he had been working on. "We can build a raft and ride the stream out of the darkness."

"Is that it?" sneered Grapple. "I thought you had something new to say, not just this sad old lunacy of rafts and torrents. We've heard it all before."

Merrison said: "You've heard, but have you tried to listen?"

"You keep out of this," said Lock. "You're an outsider here; this is no business of yours."

Merrison said: "My life will be forfeit if we do not make better choices. I'd say that means I have a stake in what's decided."

Before Lock could answer, one of the men in the corner sat up and spoke.

"And what of my life?"

It was my cousin, Hammer, who had lost his hand and taken other hurts during the first of the duster attacks. He had been drifting in and out of consciousness and none of us had thought that he was even aware of the argument.

"What of *my* life? You speak of chances and hope. But I have heard the thunder of the Night Rush. Even a strong man might be broken in such currents, and those of us who are weakened and wounded, what chance do we have? It will be our bones that are returned to the daylight if anything is ever returned at all."

"Will your chances be any better," said Buttress, "if you stay here and wait for the dusters? For that is the only option that remains."

"That is not true," said Grapple. "There is another way out. The way up Long Drop. The way that we came down."

Buttress was shaking his head and digging his fingers into his ears, as if he could not believe the things he was hearing. "But we've already *tried* that way. We've tried it twice and both times the dusters have driven us back."

"We failed because we went about it wrong," said Grapple. "We were underprepared. We need to build up our strength."

"And how will we do that," demanded Merrison, "when our stocks of rockfruit will only last another day if half of us refrain from eating it at all?"

"If that's true," I said hotly, "if our stocks really *are* that depleted, it's only because somebody has been taking more than their fair share."

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There were nods and murmurs of agreement. Evidently I was not the only one who had guessed there was a thief in our midst. But Merrison just shrugged as if he didn't realize his honor had been challenged.

Grapple said: "There are fresh supplies of fruit at Lightless Lake. I saw them growing there. By now they should be ripe enough to eat."

Buttress said: "Lightless Lake is a day and a half away. That's three days there and back."

Grapple said: "In which case, you'd better get moving. It's about time you and your trickster friend did something to earn your keep. You've done damn all since we came down here, except skulk around avoiding trouble and trying to undermine my authority."

I saw Buttress flinch, and even though I was angry at my brother's behavior I still felt that the words were unfair. Buttress had fought as hard as any of us. The fact that he was uninjured was a tribute to his skill and strength, not any sign of cowardice or laziness.

"You and the Magician can go to the lake and bring back the food we need. Once we've fed we'll be ready to make another attempt on the cliff."

I saw Buttress glance at Merrison and I saw the tiny nod the Magician gave in response and then I heard my brother say: "If that is your instruction, Father, then of course we will — "

Before he could say any more, I blurted out: "You can't let them go!"

For the first time that evening I felt my father's eyes staring directly at me. They were hot with anger.

"Are all my sons determined to rebel against me?"

"I'm not trying to rebel," I said. "I'm trying to warn you. If you let the two of them go, they'll disappear and never come back. They're building a raft. I've seen it. They've been working on it together after the rest of us have gone to sleep."

"You little sneak!" said my brother, and Merrison uttered a curse.

"Better a sneak than a traitor," said my father.

"I'm not a traitor," said Buttress. "We *need* a raft. We will all die without it."

"I don't give a damn what *you* need," said Grapple. "*I* need people I [illegible]t. My son Brand has proved himself to be such a person. He will [illegible]he Magician and make sure that he comes back."

I was scared when I heard these words, but also exhilarated. For the

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first time in my life my father was giving me the chance to act like a man. I tried not to think that he might also be giving me the chance to die like one.

As we were preparing to depart, my brother sidled over to me. I thought he was going to remonstrate with me further but instead I felt him pushing something into my hands.

"You'd better take this," he said. "I don't suppose the old man is going to allow me to keep it and I'd feel better if I knew you were carrying it."

I was tempted to thrust the spear back at him and tell him that I had no interest in how well or badly he felt, but then I looked at him and saw how much this gesture had cost. I took the spear and thrust it into its carrying straps.

"Come on," I said to Merrison. "We'd better be gone if we're going."

Various farewells, my brother's chief among them, had floated down the tunnel after us, but I was caught up in the excitement of the moment and did not think to reply. I like to believe that if I had known what was coming I'd have found the strength of heart to thank him.

WHEN I OPENED my eyes the first thing I saw was the duster. Its open mouth lay less than a dozen inches from my toes. Half the blood in its body seemed to have exploded from its throat. I prodded its head, which rocked beneath my foot. No reaction. The creature was definitely dead.

"Brand?" It was Merrison's voice, muffled, slightly breathless. "Brand, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said, still trying to work out how that could be true. "I'm surprised half out of my wits, but other than that I'm fine. Where are you?"

"At the bottom of the shaft. I've got a bit of a problem. Do you think you could give me a hand?"

I looked at the fallen duster. The pallid light of its body still illuminated the darkness although death was already dimming its radiance. I reckoned there was just about enough space between the body and the wall for me to wriggle past.

A few minutes struggle brought me down to Merrison. All I could see of him was his boots and the lower parts of his legs. The rest of him was still inside the drop shaft.

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"I'm trapped," he said. "I need you to cut me out." His voice was strained and breathless.

"What in God's name happened?" I said. For a moment I wondered whether I ought to go back to signing but then dismissed the idea. If there were any other dusters within earshot they already knew we were there.

"I killed it. Wrapped myself around your spear, dropped down the shaft, let gravity do the work."

With that critical piece of information, the scene began to make sense. It looked as if the spear had gone through the scales and through the duster's body and out the other side. I was more than just impressed, I was awestruck. And then I saw something else, something that made me blanch.

"Blood of the sages," I whispered. Merrison must have heard the change in my voice.

"It's all right," he said. But it wasn't all right. It wasn't all right at all. The spear was not just sticking into the duster's body. The top of the shaft had skewered the base of Merrison's right leg.

"Your leg," I breathed.

"Forget about it," he said, and now the pain in his voice was obvious. "It's not important. I need you to help me here. You've still got your knife, haven't you? You need to cut away the body. If you attack it at the gap between two of the scales it will probably be easier."

"But — "

"Brand, I appreciate your concern but it really isn't helping. I need you to stop standing there and do what I ask. Okay?"

His words shamed me in a way that I had never known before. *This* was the man whom I had dismissed as a weakling and a coward? I got to work, and it was every bit as tough and disgusting as I had expected it would be. A ripe, cheesy smell came off the duster's body, and that was before the chunks of warm meat began flicking out beneath the blade of my knife. Eventually I succeeded in cutting Merrison free. We were both covered in gore and bits of duster flesh.

"Can you hold onto the shaft while I pull my leg away?" said Merrison. "Try not to break it; we may well need it again."

I could only hope he was talking about the spear.

I nodded, and we did what we needed to do. There was just enough

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light to see the hole in Merrison's leg. It was small and neat and the spear had missed the bone, but it was still a ghastly sight. He dragged himself down the side of the duster and lay with his back to the wall, hands pressed tightly round his knee. He was gasping softly. I had no idea how we were going to get back to The Hollow. In theory, we were only a couple of hours away, but with his leg in the state it was, that might as well be days.

"What are we going to do?" I said.

"Wait," he answered. "Give me a few minutes and then I'll be ready to move."

I admired his courage, but it was clear that he did not know what he was talking about. I said, "I think it would be better if I tried to get back on my own. I'll get the others; we can come back and help you."

"No," he said. "It'll be all right. Honestly. Look." And he rolled up the cloth of his trouser leg to show me. I turned my head away.

"Look," he said again, more insistently.

So I looked, and I did not believe what I saw. In front of my eyes, the ruined meat of his leg was building itself back up. I could literally see it growing. And for the first time I realized that although there was muck and gore spread over both his legs there was no blood running from the wound itself. I tore my gaze away from that impossible injury and looked into his eyes and saw he was smiling at me.

"Is it magic?" I said.

"Not magic," he replied. "*Technology.*" This was not a word I knew, and from its oddly angled syllables I got the impression that, for the first time since I had known him, he was speaking a word that came entirely naturally to him. "*Augmented bio-repair*, they call it. It's something built into our bodies to help us fight infections, cope with accidents and trauma. They expect life to get rough in the Recovery Corps and so they make us tough." For a moment the smile faltered and a look of nausea flashed across his face. "Though never quite as tough as we would like."

"I don't understand," I said.

"No reason why you should. And there's not a lot of time for proper explanations. Do you remember the story I told, the Alliance and the Empire?"

"I remember," I said. "I assumed it was something you made up in order to annoy my father."

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"I might have told it for that reason, but the story is true, as I said. The Illowain and the Gradyne both existed. They fought themselves to destruction in exactly the way I told. And thousands of years after the war was over, the weapons that they left behind are still lying around causing havoc. When my own people left their world and started to travel amongst the stars they found whole systems that had been reduced to ruins as a result of that long-ago conflict."

"So it's true then?" I said. "The Magicians really *do* come from a different world?"

"Different world, different star. Some of my people decided we ought to do something to try and clean up the mess that the war had left. After all, a lot of that hardware was as dangerous to us as it was to anyone else. And there was always the chance of making a profit out of it. That's how the Corps was born."

"And is that what you're here for?"

"Not exactly." He paused to probe the edges of his wound with the tips of his fingers. The skin was mottled with bruises but it was starting to knit together. "Look, I'm going to be ready to move in a few more minutes, but before we go there's things we need to do."

"What things?"

"First of all we need to get our clothes off."

I gaped at him. A number of the other, more lurid, stories about the nature and practices of Magicians had just come rushing back to me. He saw my expression and I'll swear it made him grin.

"Not for that," he said. "Even if you were my type, which you're not, I'd hardly say our present situation was conducive to romance. We need to get our clothes off because they're covered in duster blood. Knuckledusters, if you hadn't figured it out already, have a highly developed sense of smell. I suspect there are plenty of them around here already and they're only hanging back because this one's death scream will have got them spooked. But if we start crawling through the tunnels with this gore sticking to us we might as well be banging a dinner gong.

"What we need to do is root around and see if we can find any of the fruit that might have survived the fall."

"Why do we need rockfruit?" I said. "It's heavy, hard to carry and

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tastes like watered-down turd. Why don't we just carve some meat off and then get out of here?"

"The meat's not a bad idea. Lord knows, we could use the protein. Although I think you might find that the taste is pretty rancid. But I wasn't thinking of the rockfruit for food. If we can get hold of the husk and crumble it up, it'll act as a kind of soap, get the worst of the muck off our bodies."

"How do you know this stuff?" I said as I started to peel off my shirt.

His tone as he answered was unexpectedly grim.

"I know because I have seen it before, or something very like it."

He had found a chunk of rockfruit beneath a claw of the duster. He bent and handed it to me, wincing at the pressure on his leg. I frowned and then, following his example, started to rub the stuff into my skin. It wasn't exactly like soap and didn't exactly smell pleasant, but it did form a crust with the muck on our skins, and after a few minutes that crust could be peeled off.

"You asked how we got here," he said. "Basically, it was an accident. We were on another world, a long way from here and an even longer way from anywhere much else. We were doing our job. I don't have time for the details but the gist is: we got careless. Things got out of hand, several of my comrades were killed and our ship was badly damaged. The mess we were in was bad enough that we couldn't stay in that star system but our ship was no longer in a state where it could have got us back to human space. We just had to find a bolt hole, somewhere we could run to.

"Nobody knew anything about this world. In fact, we didn't even know for sure that there was a world here. The best the computers could offer us was *a reasonable probability* that there would be a life-supporting world here. We got lucky on that count if not on anything else. We made it here, but our engines were totally wrecked. They need six months in an exotic matter workshop before there's any hope of them firing again. Which made it a bit regrettable that your world was just about entering the steam age."

He peeled the last of the blood-muck from his skin and dropped it on the floor. "So there we were," he said. "Stuck on a world where we didn't belong with no hope of rescue. And that wasn't the worst thing either."

"What was?" I said.

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"The fact that this world had once been touched by the war. Not dramatically — it had been touched rather than hit, but there were signs of it everywhere for those with eyes to see."

"What signs?"

"Well, the most obvious one is the thing you call the Hawk Star. It's actually an Illowain observation satellite. We reckon it's been staring down at you for the last ten thousand years or so, waiting to beam news about the kind of civilization you'd eventually turn into back to a place that no longer exists.

"I suppose in a lot of ways you were lucky it was the Alliance that found you rather than the Empire. The Illowain had a policy of leaving folk alone until the folk were ready to talk. If the Gradyne had come calling then you'd definitely have known about it. The thing is, though, you shouldn't run away with the idea that the Illowain were unambiguously good guys. They were caught up in a war and they were only prepared to follow their principles so far. They were prepared to tolerate the idea of planets staying neutral, but they weren't prepared to run the risk of having a neutral world go over to the enemy. So when they came across a world that wasn't ready to become part of the Alliance, they would leave some stuff behind to make sure it didn't become part of the Empire."

"What sort of stuff?" I said. Then, before he could answer, I figured it out for myself. "You mean, weapons and stuff like like that?"

"Stuff like that," said Merrison. "Yes."

"And you think that the knuckledusters might be one of the things they left?"

"Maybe."

"But," I said, "If this really did take place thousands of years ago, then the dusters couldn't have been running around underground for all that time."

He didn't answer. Instead, he tensed and lowered his ear to the ground.

"There is an answer to that, at least I think there is, but I can't give it to you now. For one thing I might not be right, and even if I am you won't want to believe me. For another, there isn't time. I have a feeling that things are going to get nasty 'round here. Let's hack off some meat and get gone. Once we're back at The Hollow there'll be more time to talk."

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The journey back to The Hollow was not a pleasant one. Crawling through the tunnels in nothing but our skin was painful, difficult, and uncomfortable. All the same, when we were finally reunited with the rest of the group I almost found myself wishing that the journey had been longer.

I was shocked by the state of my companions. I felt as if I had fallen into one of those tales where a man awakes from sleep and finds that everyone he knew is aged or mad or dead. Apart from the pallor of decay and despair hanging over everything, nothing appeared to have changed in the time we had been away. Lock still huddled over the rockwood fire, fighting a chill that could not be assuaged. My father glowered in the corner as though afraid to be too close to the entrance. Hammer, amazingly, still lay with his back to the wall. I could not believe that my cousin had survived as long as he had, but from his ragged breathing it was clear to me he could not last much longer.

Then I noticed that one thing definitely *was* different. Buttress was not there.

"What happened to him?" I demanded.

"Dead," said Lock, and I was horrified to hear a note of satisfaction in his voice.

"How did he die?"

"How do you think?"

"A duster?"

My father grunted an acknowledgment but refused to meet my eyes. Lock picked up pieces of rockwood and forced them into the flames. The curious shrinkage I had previously seen in my father appeared to have infected the remainder of the group. As he hunched over the fire, Lock's body looked twisted out of true. It was as if something had pulled his joints from their sockets and carelessly forced them together. The others were the same. There was a gauntness in their bodies, a desperation in their eyes. They seemed shriveled half to death. They had gathered rocks and boulders from outside the chamber and piled them along the walls as if they sensed their own diminution and feared being eaten by shadows if they failed to fill the space.

We told our story. At Merrison's request I made no mention of the

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things I had learned about him. I was loath to deceive the others but I accepted his argument that it was the right thing to do. He was already hated and mistrusted: they would not like him any better for knowing what he was.

When we finished, there was silence. It was Lock who broke it. The doctor's voice was rattly and thin, as if his vocal chords had been replaced by cobweb.

"We are doomed."

It sounded as if even the idea of hope was a burden he was no longer able to bear.

Merrison said: "We are doomed if we let ourselves be doomed."

And I chimed in: "We are doomed if we stay here."

"We are doomed whatever we do. The dusters will come. That thing your mad courage killed will draw them in. They will come and hunt us down and we will be consumed."

"Yes, you're right!" I exclaimed. "That will surely happen if we remain here. But if we move, if we take what we have and run, there is still a chance for us."

"You sound like your treacherous brother," said Grapple.

"He was no traitor," I said. "He told the truth and none of us had the guts to listen."

"Guts?" said Lock. "He wanted us to run."

"Yes, and he was right."

Before I could say any more, another voice piped up.

"Do you want *me* to run, as well, Brand?" It was Hammer, my cousin, speaking. Of course it was. I had this mad idea that we were going to go through the exact same argument we had had three days before with me playing the role of my brother.

"Would you like to see me run? Or do you really mean that you want to run yourself and leave the rest of us for the dusters?" His throat was so clotted with blood and phlegm that his words were all but incomprehensible.

Grapple said: "There will be no running. There will be no more efforts to argue with our fate. Our course was set when we fell into this place and all we have done since is demean ourselves by trying to escape it. Better to die with honor, killing as many of the monsters as we can, than be chased through the tunnels and picked off one by one."

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"Honor!" exclaimed Merrison. "There can be no honor in a situation like this. The dusters have no care for how you live or die; you cannot believe that your courage will earn their respect."

"I do not care for their respect; I care about my own."

At that moment, Hammer began to rattle and thrash. His head shook back and forth. From right across The Hollow, I could hear his forehead cracking on the stone. Merrison jumped to his feet. He bent over the writhing body and I wondered if he was reaching out to help, or if he meant to administer a killing blow and put an end to at least one part of our dilemma.

I spoke again, still trying to sway my father.

"Death with honor is better than dying without. But surely there is more honor in trying to survive than in laying down our lives for nothing? Isn't it clear — "

There was a noise from the far side of the room. A curiously liquid *thud* followed by a grunt.

My father got to his feet. He tried to stand straight, but was unable. His legs were bowed, his back contorted, his arms were like bent branches. Only his glare was true.

"Clear?" he raged. "I'll tell you what's clear. It's clear that neither of my sons has ever been possessed of either brains or guts. A couple of hours in the company of this *Magician* is enough to turn them into cravens and traitors. Do you think I am blind to your ambition? Do you think I do not see that you seek to usurp my authority?"

"That isn't true," I said. "All I have ever done is what was best for all of us."

He spat on the floor at my feet.

"I think I believe you. That makes it even worse. You're not just a traitor, you're a fool who doesn't realize what he's sold himself for. You probably still think this bastard saved your life."

"He *did* save my life," I said.

"Idiot!" said Grapple. "You would never even have been in that tunnel if it hadn't been for him. He got you to go down there and then dropped rockfruit on you to make sure the duster would return."

"That isn't how it happened! If he'd wanted to kill me, why would he kill the duster?"

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"Not for love of you. Oh, it was convenient enough that you happened to survive, but it was never really the point. The point was to make sure the rest of us were screwed."

Grapple grabbed hold of the meat we had brought back and waved it in my face. "He not only killed the duster, ensuring that the tunnels would be crawling with dozens of others, he even destroyed the rockfruit that might have sustained us and replaced it with this shit. *You might find the meat a little rancid,*" he squealed, lifting his voice in a parody of Merrison's. "More than a little! The fucking stuff is poison. Your life-saving friend has been out to kill us all."

And he upended the bag and tipped it onto the fire.

"It isn't true," said Merrison. "Not one word is true."

There was something wrong with his voice. It sounded as if there was something in his throat. I turned to see what had happened and gave a gasp of horror. There was a knife sticking out of his neck. It was Hammer's; he must have had it hidden under the blankets. I could see the wooden handle, I could see the shining metal. There was blood running out 'round the blade.

"You're meant to fall down and die," said Lock, as if explaining something to a small and stupid child.

"Sorry to disappoint you," said Merrison.

I could see his hands trying to move, trying to reach for the blade in his neck. Trying to move and failing. I remembered the paralysis that had gripped him when pierced by my brother's spear. This looked like that, only worse.

"I'm not disappointed," said Lock. "If you were already dead I wouldn't be able to do this."

He hit the Magician full in the face and then kicked his legs out from underneath him. Merrison fell like a tree trunk. His face smashed into the ground about a foot away from the fire.

"Lie there and burn," said Lock.

"Forget about him," said Grapple. "There's hardly any time left."

I had thought that all the meat my father had dumped would have extinguished the fire, but it had not. And although rockwood did not burn especially hot, there had been enough warmth in there to set the fat to sizzling. The sweet, strong smell of cooking flesh flooded the air, and my

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mouth responded with saliva. It certainly did not smell as if it were poison. And then, as the aroma thickened, I realized something else.

Dusters have a phenomenal sense of smell.

I stared at the fire in shock.

"You're going to draw them in! You're going to make them come!"

"Oh, hush your noise," said Grapple. "They would be coming anyway." As if his words had summoned them, I heard the sound of drumming feet. My father turned 'round and grabbed a couple of those stones I had seen before, and started dragging them toward the mouth of the cave. "We've known that all along, and we've been making preparations while you've been plotting to betray us."

"What preparations?"

All the group was moving. Even Hammer was on his feet, although he was so enfeebled he could hardly lift a pebble.

"We're going to block ourselves in," said Grapple. "Seal ourselves up. Keep ourselves safe forever."

Grapple was grunting with effort, trying to push a boulder half as big as himself in the direction of the entrance.

"That's insane!" I shouted. "We don't have much food and hardly any water. We're not going to be safe, we're all going to die!"

Merrison spoke. His mouth was pressed against the ground but his words were perfectly clear. "Have you figured out what's happening yet, Brand? Have you figured out the answer to your question?"

"Shut up! Shut up!" shouted Grapple.

"And what about the rest of you?" Merrison continued. "Do you know what's going to happen? Can you feel if it's started yet? You'll know when it does: it'll feel like hot skewers in your limbs."

"If you don't shut up," said Grapple. "I'm going to stave your head in."

"I don't think you will," said Merrison. "I don't think you've got time. Got to get the cave all sealed before the change begins."

There was fury in my father's eyes, and something else as well. Something that was furtive and guilty and terrified. *He knows*, I thought. I hadn't a clue what was happening, but my father understood perfectly what Merrison was talking about.

"I can save you," said Merrison. He had given up on Grapple and was talking straight to me. "I can save you if you set me free."

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The final stones were shifting into place. The air was full of the stink of duster meat. The shadows that the fire cast were twisted and deformed.

"Last chance," said Merrison.

It was the shadows that did it. The way they moved. No human shadow ought to move like that. I flung myself across the floor and snatched the knife from his neck.

What happened next was a bloody, murderous blur which I have no wish to remember, let alone describe. But there was one last thing I saw that surely needs to be told. One last thing that is the point of everything else.

In the seconds before Merrison began to use the knife on my father, I saw the old man turn to face him. He still looked contorted, but the misshaping of his body no longer seemed like a weakness. His arms were extended in a fighting pose, and below them I could see something that had burst out of his chest, out of each side of his tunic.

I knew what I was seeing. Although they were still thin and rather string-like, and the claws at their tips had not yet fully developed, there was really no mistaking them. They were a pair of knuckleduster legs.

Then Merrison kicked the fire aside and there was nothing but darkness.

AN INDETERMINATE TIME afterward, I felt something moving in the air in front of me. It was only when I felt the warmth of skin against my face that I knew for sure it was Merrison and not the thing my father had turned into.

Are you all right? he signed.

"Not really." I spoke the words out loud. I could hear things moving on the other side of the rocks — dusters, lots of dusters — but I didn't care.

"Are they all dead?" I said. I was talking about my family, my friends.

"I'm afraid so. There was nothing I could do. Once the transformation has started, there doesn't seem to be a way of stopping it."

"You knew this was going to happen?"

"Not for sure, not until the end. Until then, all I had were suspicions. Admittedly, they were quite strong suspicions. There were so many clues,

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you see. The way that people got more and more relaxed the longer they stayed in The Hollow. The way they never *really* tried to get out of the tunnels. I'd seen this sort of thing before."

"On other worlds?" I said.

"Yes. This is how the Illowain could have weapons that would last for thousands of years without the need for either fuel or maintenance. For most of the time there's nothing down here at all, just rockfruit growing and rotting in the dark. Nothing happens until people find their way into the tunnels and eat the fruit. That's what triggers the changes. Behavioral changes to make sure they keep eating, don't try to leave too soon. And finally the physical changes that — well, you saw it for yourself.

"It's a very efficient system. The plants just lie there for centuries without doing anything at all. But when the time comes that you *need* to raise an army, all it takes is a lure to draw people into the tunnels."

"The Forizael-rush," I said. All those people from all over the world, looking for wealth in the mines and never guessing what they might find in the tunnels far below.

"Would they all have turned into dusters?" I said.

"Theoretically, yes, but in practice it would probably just have been Grapple. He'd been stealing all the rockfruit so the process was further advanced with him than for the rest of them. They'd have turned into food before they got a chance to turn into anything else."

Somehow the idea that my father could be accused of theft and I could say nothing to defend him hurt more than anything else that day. It took me a while before I was ready to speak again.

"What about the dusters outside? Won't they try to get in?"

"If they wanted to, they could. Grapple's barricade was never going to be a match for a bunch of hungry dusters. It wasn't there to keep them out; it was there to keep us in. The ones outside will only take an interest if we try to escape. This is a birthing pen; that means it's sacrosanct. Dusters fight each when they're older, but they leave the babies alone, at least until they've had their first meal."

Their first meal, I thought. That would have been me if Merrison hadn't saved me.

I said: "You knew all this. You knew that this was going to happen, but you did nothing to stop it."

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"What could I do? If I had told you this before, would you have believed me?"

"I'm not just talking about now. You said it yourself, *people get lured underground*. All your equipment, all your *technology* was making it easier to be lured, opening the mines up faster, letting more people be sucked into this trap."

He said: "The dew rush was happening anyway. At least our intervention helped some good come out of the business."

"What good?" I said.

"Thanks to our involvement, these mines have become a center for more technological change than this planet has seen in centuries. And what people learn here they will take home and develop. The steam engines and the other machines that we have built here are the start of a process that will transform this world and one day take your people to the stars."

I thought about transformations. I thought that if I got up and moved around then it wouldn't be long before I put my hand in something that had been transformed.

"Is that for our benefit?" I said. "Or is it more about changing our world so it'll be easier for you and your crew mates to get home?"

There was a long silence. Eventually Merrison said: "You're angry. I can understand that. You think I've treated you and your people badly. Maybe that's true. But there's more at stake here than the fate of your family or my crew mates or any of the people in the mines. The threat from the knuckledusters existed long before any of my people came to your world. The rockfruit was always here. Sooner or later you would have dug down into the earth and found it. Our being here might have brought that process forward but at least this way you'll have someone on your side who knows what you're facing and has some experience dealing with it."

"Why does anyone have to deal with them?" I said. "Why can't we just leave them down here?"

"Because they're not just fruit anymore. They've turned into dusters and they're not going to *stay* down here. You said it yourself. This is not a viable ecology. The dusters cannot live down here indefinitely. This is an army being built in the dark. Sooner or later they *will* climb up to the daylight. We have to get out and warn people before it happens."

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I said: "Not much chance of our getting out with that lot roaming around."

"Whatever chance there is we must take it. And things may not be quite as bad as they seem. The dusters outside will want to get clear before the infant emerges. It cuts down on territorial squabbles. Once that happens we can grab the raft and make our way to the Night Rush."

"Good plan," I said. "Just one problem with it. There is no raft. Grapple burned it. I saw a piece of it just before—" I broke off. I didn't want to finish that sentence. "He probably smashed it up just after they killed Buttress."

Merrison said: "There are bits of wood around. We could lash them into something. Hell, what else are we going to do before we die? It won't be much of a raft..."

"...but it'll be better than nothing," I said.

And now it's three days later and we stand at the edge of the Night Rush with our knocked-together raft lying on the ground in front of us. I think it's probably just as well that it's dark and we can't see how bad a job we've done of lashing it together. The air is full of spray and the thunder of the torrent, and the idea of entering the water is altogether terrifying.

"This is mad," I say.

"It's a chance," says Merrison. "In fact, it's better than a chance. This is the way out. This is how we are going to get out."

I reach out and take his hand. In spite of everything that has happened, I know that he is right.

Ready? he asks me.

I touch his face. *I'm ready.*

We wrap our arms around the raft in the way we have agreed and, without further hesitation, throw ourselves forward. The water is bitingly cold. I kick with my legs, tasting salt and ice. Then the current seizes and drags us headlong downward, drawing us into the darkness that lies between us and the day.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Lisey's Story, by Stephen King, Scribner, 2006, $28.

I WASN'T going to review a second Stephen King book this year. King certainly doesn't need reviews, and most readers have already made up their minds as to whether they'll read him or not. And while King can be somewhat of an uneven writer, he hits the ball out of the park far more often than he strikes out.

But sometimes even established writers can surprise us by stretching in a new direction, or telling a new kind of story while still using the favorite tools in their toolbox. That's the case here, and it's worth talking about.

I think the most surprising thing about this book is that it's a slow burn. Usually a King novel starts with a bang, and then keeps on rolling. (*Cell* is a perfect example—by the third or fourth page, people are dying in droves.) But *Lisey's Story* doesn't really kick into gear until you're about halfway through.

Which doesn't mean it's boring—not by any means. It's just slow ...and thoughtful.

Earlier I mentioned a writer's favorite tools. One of King's is to write about writers. He's had author characters as far back as *'Salem's Lot*. But this time out, his best-selling Scott Landon has been dead for two years before the book opens and the story is told from the point of view of his widow, Lisey.

There's still plenty of opportunity to talk about the creative process (which King has always done so well), and even for Landon to be on stage through flashbacks, but mostly, as the book's title tells us, this is Lisey's story. Lisey is haunted not by the ghost of her husband so much as her memories of him.

Some of King's other writing tricks are present: the made-up words used by the characters that seem goofy (like "smucking," or

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"bool") but acquire poignant resonance the deeper we get into the novel; the Maine language tics of certain characters; the presence of a crazy-ass, dangerous character (here it's a stalker named Dooley); and of course, the supernatural.

But every place where he employs these old tools feels fresh in the context of this novel — as though King had just bought a new tool set at the hardware store. And he doesn't overuse them. So where another writer (even King, in other books) might have used the stalker element as the main plot thrust, here it's only one element of a much deeper story. And while the supernatural certainly has an enormous role (even a pivotal role, in the end), it takes a back seat to the exploration of Lisey and Scott's relationships — with each other, with their families, and with Mystery.

As usual, I'm not going to go into specific plot elements. In fact, if you're reading this column before the book, don't read the dustwrapper copy. It will be much more satisfying for you to come to the story without expectations and be surprised, horrified, and delighted by each new plot turn.

I'm always so proud of writers such as King who can still — this far in their careers, with such large bodies of work behind them — deliver a book as fresh and satisfying and moving as *Lisey's Story*.

The Green Glass Sea, by Ellen Klages, Viking, 2006, $16.99.

Okay, it's not really science fiction. But it *is* fiction, and it's about science, and the author is a recent Nebula winner, so I figure that's more than enough connections for me to cover this book in my column.

For her first novel, Ellen Klages goes back to one of the most pivotal moments in modern history: the development of the atom bomb. Secreted in Los Alamos, New Mexico, scientists work night and day in a race with their counterparts in Nazi Germany to unravel the secrets of the atom. Whoever manages to do so first, will end — and win — the war.

We all know how that turned out, but Klages isn't as interested in explaining the workings of the research, or even that much in the scientists, as she is the families that accompanied them. In particular, she focuses on two young girls: Dewey Kerrigan, a frail eleven-year-old girl whose idea of a good time is to read *The Boy Mechanic* and make gadgets; and Suze Gordon, a large

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girl of about the same age whom the other kids call "the Truck" and studiously ignore.

Now you'd think Suze would have some empathy when Dewey is bullied by the cool kids (there's always a bunch of cool kids, aren't there, who, through their spite and meanness, aren't really all that cool). Instead, Suze picks on Dewey as well, thinking it will ingratiate herself with her own tormentors. It doesn't work, of course, but she doesn't learn anything from it.

I think I dislike this sort of bully more than I do the other kind, because they understand what it's like to be powerless. But rather than siding with someone else who's being picked on, they transfer their own frustrations to bullying the person lower down from them on the ladder of power.

Dewey is a terrific kid, smart, kind, and wise beyond her years. The kind of kid you really want to protect from the ills of the world. So it's all the harder when we have to share the tragedies of her life.

As events unfold, the two girls get thrown together, and...well, I'm not going to tell you where it goes from there.

Set against this very human front story is the background story of the scientists and their project: their excitement and joy with what they're discovering that becomes tempered by the realization of what their research will eventually unleash. It's that moment when the research is no longer theoretical, but real in how it will affect human lives, that creates the clash between practicality and conscience.

You'd never know this was a first novel from reading it. Klages writes with a simple assurance, vividly bringing to life the world of the forties, as well as the mores and mindsets of the people inhabiting it.

It's an entrancing novel from beginning to end, and if you'd like a taste of it, the short story upon which it's based is still available on-line at *Strange Horizons (www.strangehorizons.com/2004/20040906/greenglass-f.shtml).*

The Tough Guide to Fantasyland, by Diana Wynne Jones, Firebird Travel, 2006, $9.99.

Here's another book I wasn't going to review, since I've mentioned it in passing a number of times over the years I've been writing this column (and actually reviewed it about eight years ago), but with this new edition in hand, I find myself unable to resist bringing it to your attention once again.

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It's laid out a bit like the U.K. travel series of Rough Guide books, using the conceit that it's a guide through a "tour" of Fantasyland — though it should be noted that the full experience usually requires three trips. Along the way, it points out, and at times mercilessly lampoons, the tropes of the genre. It'll probably bring to your attention things that you never considered before, while reading a fantasy novel, such as:

> "COMMON COLD. This is one of many viral nuisances not present. You can get as wet, cold and tired as you like, and you will still not catch a cold. But see PLAGUE."

Or perhaps:

> "INDUSTRY. Apart from a bit of pottery and light metalwork, or some slagheaps around the domain of the DARK LORD, most Tours encounter no Industry at all. Even EMBROIDERY factories are kept well out of sight. "See also ECONOMY."

I could pull out my original edition of the book to compare it to this "Revised and Updated Edition," but really, what's the point? What's important is that, after being hard to find for too many years, *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* is finally back in print in a readily affordable edition.

That's all you need to know, except maybe, who's this book for?

That's easy:

- Anyone who's thinking of writing a fantasy novel or story. Seriously. You need to read this to see how easy it is to fall into cliché, and so, hopefully, avoid it.
- Anyone who reads fantasy. You'll laugh, trust me. And you know, Jones isn't laughing at you; she's laughing at all the people who don't get it.
- Anyone who hates fantasy. Because it points out all the reasons you don't like fantasy, and does so with killer humor.

What else can I say to convince you? How about that this edition is "Dark Lord Approved"?

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

Paraspheres: Extending Beyond the Spheres of Literary and Genre Fiction, edited by Rusty Morrison and Ken Keegan, Omnidawn Publishing, 2006, $19.95.

In Persuasion Nation, by George Saunders, Riverhead Books, 2006, $23.95.

The Nimrod Flipout, by Etgar Keret, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2006, $12.

Skinny Dipping in the Lake of the Dead: Stories, by Alan De Niro, Small Beer Press, 2006, $16.

Slipstreams, edited by Martin H. Greenberg and John Helfers, DAW, 2006, $7.99.

Where, today, do the boundaries of fantasy and science fiction lie?

Over the last twenty years, a number of people have tried to acknowledge sf or fantasy of literary quality without calling it sf or fantasy. In the 1960s and after, in the wake of the "discovery" by U.S. readers and critics of writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Maria Vargas Llosa, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Jorge Luis Borges, "Magic Realism" was the popular label. But the term never fit comfortably on Anglophone writers. Some people tried "Speculative Fiction" but the term smelled of science fiction (it was originated by Robert Heinlein and popularized by a later generation of sf writers). In the 1970s, academic critic Robert Scholes tried the term "Fabulation" (and later "Speculative Fabulation"), but that never caught on. The Interstitial Arts Foundation, as we might expect, talks about "interstitial" fiction. And, as much to divorce such work from true science fiction as to promote it, Bruce Sterling, in 1989, invented the term "Slipstream" to define this non-genre of fantastic works written mostly (but not always) by non-sf writers.

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The good news is that an increasing amount of such fiction has been published in the last twenty years. And so here comes *Paraspheres*, an anthology that attempts to understand and promote this fuzzing of the borders.

Editor Ken Keegan's afterword covers some of this history. He comes from the mainstream side of the mainstream/genre divide, yet he accepts the value of the fantastic and is trying hard to find a way to bring it to readers who do not normally like this sort of thing. Keegan identifies two forms of fiction, "Genre" and "Literary." Genre is formula fiction, not interested in character, written to provide escape. Literary fiction is "that which has recognized cultural and artistic value." (He leaves unspoken who it is who decides this). This primary meaning of literary fiction, Keegan says, has been equated, in the commercial publishing industry, with "narrative realism." And narrative realism depends on deep characterization.

Therefore any fiction that does not place character development at its center has not been judged literary, and has no cultural and artistic value. In *Paraspheres*, Keegan and co-editor Rusty Morrison attempt to collect fiction "which does have cultural meaning and artistic value and therefore does not fit well in the escapist formula genres, but which has non-realistic elements and settings that exclude it from the category of literary fiction. This third type of fiction may not be character based." They call such fiction "Fabulist" or "New Wave Fabulist" (a term used by guest editor Peter Straub for an issue of the literary magazine *Conjunctions* in 2002).

I confess that this whole discussion makes me a little tired — anyone who has been committed to sf of the highest order (i.e. me) has heard these arguments — has *made* these arguments — hundreds of times, and the result never seems to change. But maybe a new name will help. So by all means, let's put Ursula K. Le Guin and Rudy Rucker and Kim Stanley Robinson in a book of "New Wave Fabulists" and maybe someone will read them with unprejudiced eyes.[1]

Paraspheres contains a generous fifty stories, twelve of which are reprints. Those of us familiar

[1] Confession: I am the co-editor, with James Patrick Kelly, of the recently published anthology, *Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology*, which may be said to do the same thing, using a different label, as *Paraspheres*.

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with genre publishing, in particular the more avant garde small press magazines of the last decade, will find familiar names like L. Timmel Duchamp and Shelley Jackson and Jeffrey Ford, and Jeff VanderMeer, along with Le Guin, Michael Moorcock, Angela Carter and Rudy Rucker. But the majority of the anthology, and most of the originals, are by writers who do not associate themselves with genre, and here there is evidence that the fantastic is widespread in contemporary fiction.

Many of the stories are fragments of larger works, and thus a little unsatisfying as stories. Leena Krohn, a Finnish writer, has three excerpts from a forthcoming novel, no two of which seem connected, but unnerving nonetheless. In "The Ice Cream Vendor," a mother and daughter visit a strangely deserted beach, where the only other person is an ice cream vendor writing on an old typewriter. The story has intimations of disaster (tidal wave, atomic war?) that never resolve.

Rikki Ducornet's "Who's There?" is a three-paragraph conceit about advertising slogans being beamed directly into people's minds against their will. An sf writer might have used this as a premise for a story with characters and plot, but here it is merely a metaphorical protest against commercialization.

In Ira Sher's two-page "Lionflower Hedge," adults go back to the old house where they grew up, crawl through the hedge, and in doing so become children again. In K. Bannerman's "Armegedn, or The End of the Word," people suddenly lose ability to speak or read. They then discover if they destroy a printed word, someone may speak that same word. But a printed word, once destroyed, may only be spoken once, and so language becomes a limited resource, like oil, as the store of books printed throughout history is gradually destroyed. This is a clever conceit, but in three pages Bannerman does not go beyond setting it before us.

Other stories have more narrative heft. In Bradford Morrow's "Gardener of Heart," an archeologist brother returns home for his twin sister's funeral, only in the end to discover it is *his* funeral. In "Jubilee Dreams" by Karen Heuler, Jubilee and her sister Clarice are rivals. One stayed home, the other traveled. Now they compete in Jubilee's dreams, which Clarice sabotages — but Jubilee turns the tables in the end.

"The Cloud Room" by Kevin Reardon tells of a gay computer

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consultant in Seattle on business, pining after his old lost lover Liam. He meets a destitute boy in a hotel bar. The boy reads his dreams, they share a hotel room, and the boy reveals something to the man that he has been keeping from himself. The story ends with a beautifully prepared-for surprise.

"An Accounting" by Brian Evenson is set in what appears to be a post-holocaust U.S. devolved to a rude village culture. In this world a man goes west from Pennsylvania to the midwest, becomes "Jesus" to Christians there who misread him. He finds himself drawn to that role, and the story moves toward atrocity, and then a final accounting.

Randal Silvis's "The Night of Love's Last Dance" is magic realism in a Latin American setting, very reminiscent of some of Márquez's stories of his mythical town of Macondo. An old man looks back on the story of how, when he was a boy, the town beauty slept with a mysterious stranger. Though it ends inconclusively, we can tell that the man's life has never been the same.

Some of the strongest stories are the reprints. Angela Carter's "The Cabinet of E. A. Poe" dissects Poe's psyche and fiction and tells a horror story at the same time. Kim Stanley Robinson's "The Lucky Strike" is one of the finest short alternate histories ever written. Rudy Rucker's horror comedy "The Jack Kerouac Disembodied School of Poetics" tells us how he became a writer. And Le Guin's "The Birthday of the World" soberly tells of the destruction of an alien planetary culture by the advent of human visitors, recalling the Spanish conquest of the Inca.

Paraspheres shows that, indeed, a lot of non-genre writers are working with materials that once were the exclusive domain of genre sf and fantasy, but it also shows that the way they do so, for better or worse, bears little resemblance to the storytelling techniques of genre fiction. It's a worthwhile anthology; non-genre readers will find a lot of fiction that demonstrates that narrative realism is not the only measure of literary worth, and genre readers will be introduced to dozens of writers whose fiction of the fantastic is invisible to normal sf publications.

George Saunders has somehow managed to develop a considerable literary reputation while writing stories that, for their off-the-wall ideas, comedy, and ultimately affecting conclusions, would not be

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out of place in a Terry Bisson collection. These are not quite genre stories, but they frequently draw on fantasy and sf premises. They are often hilarious. Plus, Saunders writes the most convincingly human dumb people in contemporary fiction.

In Persuasion Nation takes up where Saunders's previous collections *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* and *Pastoralia* left off. "Jon," about teenagers raised in a facility for market research, takes a premise similar to the Rikki Ducornet conceit mentioned above and elaborates it to telling effect. Hard disks are implanted in the heads of these kids. Commercials are projected directly into their minds. The teenagers are celebrities to the world, but naïve about it, their every thought dominated by brand names. Randy (who is called Jon for PR reasons) is in love with Caroline and gets her pregnant. She wants to leave the program, but Randy/Jon is not so sure. The story is both hilarious and touching in Jon's struggles (he is about as quick on the uptake as someone who has been hit in the skull by a two-by-four) to comprehend a situation outside the world of commercials that constitutes his reality. Is he willing, for love, to have his implant removed, live in a dull world among ordinary people who don't have things, and possibly suffer brain damage in the process?

"The Red Bow" is an allegorical story like Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." In an unnamed village, diseased dogs have killed a child. The girl's father and Uncle Matt pursue the dogs and kill them. Then, with the support of the community, they pursue other dogs that may be infected. To make sure, they proceed to cats and other animals. Some owners protest this treatment, and they come under suspicion. The town meets to decide, in this atmosphere of fear, what to do. Without a moment of preaching, the story becomes a parable on the War on Terror.

"93990" is a horror comedy in the form of a clinical report on testing a new drug on twenty apes, all but one of which die horribly. The one that doesn't die seems unaffected, so the scientists try higher and higher doses to evaluate the drug. This is one of the most damning indictments of the human race I have ever seen. It is also brutally funny.

"Commcomm" starts when the PR man at army base gets called in to cover up a toxic spill. Things, as they tend to do in Saunders's stories, get out of hand, and what

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seems like satire turns into a sort of ghost story with a sweetly contemplative ending.

Saunders likes to use metafictional forms as the basis of his satire. Besides the lab report, we get "Can I Speak?," a letter from the marketing department in response to a customer complaint about a mechanized mask for infants that allows them to speak. "My Amendment" is a letter to the editor proposing a new constitutional amendment to prevent "quasi-same sex marriages," that is, marriages of feminine men to masculine women.

A few of these pieces are more joke than story, but most combine satirical excess, emotional engagement with the characters, and even the narrative suspense of conventional fiction. It's a bit of a miracle that Saunders can merge these incompatible impulses, but he pulls it off more often than not. This one is a treat.

Etgar Keret, with whose work I was not previously familiar, is apparently "one of the leading voices of Israeli literature and cinema." His collection *The Nimrod Flipout* contains quite a few comic fantasies, most of them very short. Like some of the stories in *Paraspheres*, most of these fables are there and gone quickly, but the best of them linger in the mind beyond their length.

In "For Only 9.99 (Inc. Tax and Postage)" a young man answers a newspaper ad offering him the meaning of life. He gets it, and it is indeed the meaning of life. But no one wants to hear about it, until he sees another ad offering a foolproof way to get people to listen. But some people get mad when they listen, and so he needs to send off to find out ways to convert your enemies to friends. And so on to the newspaper's final offer.

In "Fatso" another young man finds out his girlfriend turns into a coarse, beer swilling, soccer-obsessed fat man every night. The problem admits of a simple solution: they go out and raise hell in the evenings, but he still has his beautiful girl during the day.

Few of these stories go beyond five pages. The title story is the second-longest in the book. Three Israeli friends, Miron, Uzi and the narrator Ron, are haunted by the ghost of their friend Nimrod, who killed himself when they were in the army. Nimrod's spirit haunts them by making each of them go crazy in turn, in different comic ways, for a couple of weeks at a time. They cope. But when Uzi gets

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married to his girlfriend the Turnip, then only Miron and Ron are haunted. What happens if one of them drops out? Beneath this humorous knockabout is a melancholy non-political observation of everyday life for rootless contemporary young urban men.

About fifteen years ago, in an essay I wrote comparing sf and mainstream fiction, I quoted Raymond Carver's assertion that short stories are more like poems than novels. I protested that you would be hard pressed to find more than a handful of sf stories published every year of which this was true.

I don't think that's true anymore. Alan DeNiro has the sf pedigree. He is a graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop, has spent the last decade exploring the odd underworld of small press slipstream fiction. He edited poetry for Christopher Rowe's eccentric magazine "Say..." and is a member of the self-named Ratbastards, four young writers of the fantastic from Minnesota. *Skinny Dipping in the Lake of the Dead* is his first collection.

De Niro in his best work is unsettling. The title story, for instance, is a sort of love story between the narrator, Gregory, who lives in some unspecified future in the town of Suddenly bordering the "Lake of the Dead," and Jane, a girl with gills who lives on a parking deck that protrudes from the middle of the lake. De Niro is not funny like Saunders and Keret, but there is a wrong-stepping grace to his work. The story is rife with footnotes and asides and oddball notions like the Gnostic takeover of Pittsburgh and a rock song with the lyric,

> "Honey, your love makes me
> feel like Geoffrey Chaucer
> Stuck without a tale on a flying
> saucer."

De Niro is not always in control of his sentences. In these stories, one thing haphazardly leads to another, and when it doesn't work, his fiction is precious or even incomprehensible. But when it does work, as it does more often than not, it's haunting, more like a poem than a novel.

Finally, *Slipstreams* is a collection of twenty original stories that sets out to demonstrate what slipstream might be. But editor John Helfers in his introduction pretty much throws up his hands and gives up before starting: "When the idea for this anthology occurred to me, I

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will confess that I had at best an infirm grasp on what the definition of 'Slipstream' literature is. After looking over this collection of stories, I'm not sure I have any better understanding of the term now."

His charge to the writers was "for stories that combined two (or more) genres of any kind." The result is a collection of stories like Sarah Hoyt's "Hot," about a werewolf hardboiled detective seeking a clutch of dragon's eggs, or "Venting," where Alan Dean Foster's comic Western backwoodsman deals with demons in a national park, or Robert Sawyer's "Biding Time," where another hardboiled detective, this one on Mars, pursues the killer of an uploaded grandmother. The strangeness quotient in these stories is low and the storytelling conventional. There is nothing here that is likely to unsettle you, just a kind of mix-and-match retake on various familiar story moves. Not to say that these stories can't entertain, but they are not likely to test any reader's conceptions of the boundaries of genre.

My conclusion based on this brief dip into the slipstream, or whatever you call it, is that yes, the geography of fantastic fiction has changed around the edges. Writers who never would have considered sf and fantasy tropes as the basis of serious fiction are taking to it more and more. But the result is not much like the genre fiction I grew up reading and coming to love. This is not a complaint. As with any change, it has its plusses and minuses. When the ghetto walls were strong, everyone knew where they were and what to expect when visiting either side. There was a certain order to the streets and the customs. Now that rigor is fading. The resulting neighborhoods offer some new beauties, and some pretty clumsy eyesores. I'll have to leave it to you to figure out which are which.

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Now that we have a message board online, we've stopped flirting with the notion of adding a letter column to the magazine. So when this long letter arrived, it went in the manuscript pile...which turns out to be something of a fortuitous mistake after all.

Should the map that accompanied the letter ever be needed, it can be found pinned to the board over the editor's desk, between the Danny Shanahan cartoon and the postcard from Harlan Ellison.

The Strange Disappearance of David Gerrold

By David Gerrold

DEAR GORDON,

I apologize in advance, but this is the only way I can think to tell anyone about this. After that last weird experience, trying to convince people that my kid really was a Martian, I've learned that the only safe way to report stuff like this and have people take it seriously is to present it as fiction.

Right, the irony of that doesn't escape me. The only way to get people to believe the truth is first tell them it's a lie. What is it about human beings anyway — that we only believe the opposite of what we're told? (Remember when people used to tell me, "You're not as big a jerk as I heard"? Except most of the time, they didn't use the word *jerk*. Wow, what a terrific acknowledgment. That's why I love people so much. So, okay, thanks. I got the message. That's when I started announcing at the beginning of every speech, "I am not a nice man. Don't expect it of me." And that's when they started coming up to me afterward to whisper, "You are *too* a nice man." See what I mean? People are always looking for the hidden agenda, the conspiracy, the *real* truth.)

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Never mind. I digress. That's why there are editors. (Thank you.) But, here's the timeline, follow this:

End of February, right on schedule, I'm finally coming out of my usual post-Christmas depression. Don't ask. Every year the Capitalist Feeding Frenzy gets worse than the year before — or maybe, every year I get ground down a little more. So here I am, with life piled up at the front door in big uncollected piles and I need a shovel just to get out to the car. So I climb out a window, throw some stuff into the back of the camper and start driving north. I figure I'll find some little cabin somewhere, hide out for a few days, and just sit and type and type and type until I was physically and emotionally exhausted. Maybe I'll even write a story. Some people meditate. I type until it flows and then I type until it stops flowing and I know when I'm done, because I'll have a post-orgasmic smile on my face so peaceful it could make Buddha jealous. Kind of like what you see on the face of a really well-carved chocolate bunny. (Pope Dan says "hi," by the way.)

I turn on the music, the player is set for random, and I get Hubert Laws doing jazz variations on traditional Bach pieces; I don't even remember when I ripped the disc, but it's the perfect sonic wallpaper, it doesn't demand your attention until you're ready to listen, and then once you fall into it you don't want to climb out again, which is just fine for the mood I'm in. While I'm waiting for the grunge of Los Angeles to clear itself out of my head, I follow roads I've never been on before. That means getting off the freeway and taking that forgotten little turnoff that curves suggestively away into the hills. Next thing I know, I'm north of Palmdale, passing through places I didn't believe were still possible in California. Look up Green Valley, for instance.

Eventually, the road unwinds itself out onto Route 395, which should be renamed Desolation Boulevard. Almost no traffic, no towns, and nothing on either side except empty flatlands and the southernmost spine of the Sierras. I follow the road until my blood sugar finally crashes. I pull off the highway onto what would have been a dirt road if anybody had actually driven on it recently, crawl into the back of the camper, roll an old blanket around myself and snore until dawn, when a uniformed officer of the California State Highway Patrol bangs on the door and tells me to stop scaring the cow. Singular. Maybe someday this place will be able to afford a second one.

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One half-cup of paint thinner sold from a coffee urn and a BLT later, found in a place called Lone Pine, with no pine trees at all, but still big enough to attract a location company from Desperate Pictures Inc., my blood sugar is rising again, and less than an hour after that, I'm wandering through the frightening emptiness of a place called Manzanar. There's a guard tower, maybe a reconstruction, it looks too new, and a museum, and a dirt road that winds around the places where barracks used to be. I don't know why I'm here, or why it's important to be here, but the whole time, I can feel ghosts whispering in my ear. I just can't hear what they're saying. (And if I could, I wouldn't understand it. It's in Japanese.)

I find where the music player has fallen off the dashboard and under the passenger seat and plug it back in and let it play tracks at random, scrambling Coltrane and Copland, Mozart and Morrison, and more than a few surprises — unremembered tracks from Ray Lynch and Deep Forest and the Penguin Café Orchestra. Then it finds Terry Riley's "In C," and the battery dies somewhere between the fifth and seventh chord change, leaving me hanging unfinished and unresolved.

The timing is perfect.

I arrive at Mono Lake — a place so quiet and remote that you can hear your own blood rushing through your veins. You can hear the blood rushing through the veins of the person standing next to you.

Mono Lake is a casualty of the relentless thirst of that big megalopolis I just fled. Blame William Mulholland, they named a drive after him. The city diverted the water from the tributaries that feed this high altitude sea, shrinking it to less than a fourth of its former size, creating an ecological nightmare, and revealing a shoreline of tortured and alien-looking mineral deposits. The surface of the water is so still, it's a mirror of the distant mountains, deeply purple and capped with glistening snow; the sky is so blue it aches. The mountains to the west are cold and white and glistening, the sun paints the slopes with a blinding glare. Closer, the rocky minarets of the mineral deposits float like airborne castles on the glassy skin of the lake.

There's nothing here. No animals, no birds, nothing swimming in the water. It's beyond desolate. It's terrifying. The grass is dry and dead. Even the occasional bit of dry scrub looks like a desiccated remnant. There are no ghosts here, Gordon. Everywhere else, you can hear them whispering. But not here. You can't even hear your own ghost.

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And then, for one strange and paralyzing moment, I realize that I am dead. This is Hell, my eternity. I never even noticed the moment. I never even felt the impact of the cold dirt of the desert on my face when I fell. It will be weeks or months before my body is found.

When I return, when I recover, I am back behind the wheel of the car and a Nevada State Patrolwoman is asking for my vehicle registration. I fumble through the glove box, I scrabble into the console — Auto Club maps and service receipts, an instruction book for a now-useless CB radio (nobody's on the air anywhere anymore, either that or my antenna needs tuning), and a variety of coupons from places as distant as Telluride and Texas. Oh — and the recharger cord for the music player, I thought I'd lost it. Eventually she gives up and goes and runs my plates to see if the camper really belongs to me. She gives me a $491 ticket for not noticing a speed limit sign that isn't there anymore. I have no intention of paying it, I have enough trouble paying for California — so they'll issue a warrant, big deal, I can stay out of Nevada for the rest of my life; what am I going to miss? The most expensive tourist traps in the world. While she writes, I plug in the music player. The noise in my head is finally getting to me. Maybe the music will drown it out.

She finishes, I sign, she goes, and I crawl through Carson like it's a funeral procession. The sun goes down and I climb up a dark mountain road to a glittering nightmare called Tahoe. I coast down a long long slope of darkened forest and eventually crash in the parking lot of a place called Kyburz. Wherever that is. A half-cup of paint thinner and a BLT later (yeah, it's a motif; deal with it), my blood sugar is high enough that I can now recognize how tired I am. I crawl into the back of the camper and this time my snoring is loud enough to scare away bears. Of which, there might actually be some in this neighborhood. Their problem, not mine.

Sometime on the third day — is it the third day already? — I'm still staying off the Interstates — I find myself heading into Red Bluff. How I got here, I'm not even sure. But the place is actually big enough to have a Taco Bell. I don't know if I should be grateful or depressed, if this is what passes for civilization on this continent.

Okay, so look — obviously, this trip isn't working. Or maybe I've picked the wrong roads. Maybe the places I've landed are simply the very worst possible locations for exorcising a post-holiday malaise. The

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realization that I am now old enough to legally retire isn't exactly a cheerful thought either. No wonder I can't get work, I'm already dead in the eyes of the producers. That's another rant. The fetuses-in-suits who run the studios. If I can ever find a worthwhile story in that, I'll sit down at the keyboard and open a vein — one of theirs, not mine. But over here, I still feel like I'm eighteen — only with forty-four years experience.

Anyway, maybe what happened after Red Bluff was just another hallucinatory episode, like that business with the Martian kid — that one looked like the onset of senility too, except it wasn't. The kid really can taste the colors of M&Ms.

But maybe this was real too, in a perpendicular kind of way. Maybe, it was some weird confluence of time and place and dessicated state of mind. Maybe I had become so isolated from myself that I could finally see what wasn't actually in front of me.

See, look, it's like this. If I'm wrong, then this is just another crazy story from someone having a bad air day, a story that will be forgotten just as soon as next month's issues hit the stands. But maybe something is happening, and if that's the case, then I have to say it someplace where there's a chance of it getting seen by the right people and where it can't be so easily erased from history by the wrong. You know what I mean. Obviously, I'm not going to list that other stuff here, right?

Okay, so if I had been thinking straight, I'd have hopped onto I-5 and been in Seattle in time for High Tea. But I'd come this far without once having ridden the Interstates and to tell the truth, it was kinda fun seeing places that still had some character and personality left; roadside stands selling strawberries picked fresh that morning, a store with a boardwalk selling live bait, a 120-year old restaurant that still serves from the original recipes, stuff like that. I even found a gas station in a time-warp, where an attendant filled the tank for me and wiped the windshield. Well, it would have been a time-warp, except for the twenty-first century prices. If I'd have stayed on the Eisenhower Memorial Autobahn, I'd have seen the back ends of a lot of eighteen wheelers, and a couple hundred identical off ramps. Over here on the left coast, every off ramp is the same as every other one, the same three gas stations, the same three fast food chains.

But instead, just a couple blocks short of the on ramp, there was an

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almost unnoticeable intersection, a narrow road on the right that stretched away north, at least I thought it was north, after a while it turned northeast, but it couldn't have looked more inviting than if it had been paved with yellow bricks. It looked like an escape route. And yes, it was the Taco Bell sign directly ahead that convinced me to turn. When you start thinking Taco Bell is civilization, it's time to rethink the concept.

For the first hour or so, it was just me and Camille Saint-Saëns, the third symphony, the one with the runaway organ in the fourth movement — they used it in that movie about the talking pig, but thank dog those are not the pictures I see in my head when I listen to this music. I let the car laze along at a convenient forty or fifty mph, as the road wound its way through the last few ranches close to town, then on into the higher lands, which had an abandoned and desolate quality. There was no other traffic on the road — nothing — no one ahead or behind me, and no oncoming traffic either. I think I saw maybe one other pickup truck on the road, coming the other way; the driver looked at me as he passed, a mean-looking narrow-eyed stare. I began to realize there weren't any signs of life in these lands; no horses or cows or sheep, only a few crows at first, and then even they seemed unwilling to follow this track. Even though the sun was still high in the sky, the day had taken on a colorless cast.

The air was cold and dry. The sky was cloudless. There was no wind. Everything seemed to have stopped except the quiet murmur of my wheels against the asphalt.

Sometime back, the music had faded. I was so lost in myself that I hadn't even heard its absence. The silence had swaddled me, comforting at first, then a smothering blanket. I came through a series of curves, around the sharpest one, and directly ahead I saw a sloping field strewn with red blocky boulders so closely tumbled together, I doubted that any person or animal could have crossed that land. The stones could have been painted with blood. But before I could register even that fact, as the car came into the turn and I noticed the stand of woods beyond the field, I saw the sign.

I don't know if it's true for all people, but I automatically read every written word in front of me, and this was the first sign I'd seen since leaving Red Bluff.

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NO TRESPASSING
PRIVATE HUNTING CLUB
MEMBERS ONLY

I'd heard about private hunting clubs, I had mixed emotions about hunting anyway, but not because I'd wet the seat in the movie theater when Bambi's mother abruptly became venison; but more because I'd read "The Most Dangerous Game" at a young and impressionable age. I knew there were people who depended on hunting for their winter sustenance, but I doubted this was their domain. No, the very existence of the sign announced that this land was someone's personal pleasure dome. Sans dome.

These thoughts, and others, tumbled in my head, as I headed up toward the foothills. The well-maintained wire fences on both sides of the road told me I was still driving through a place where stray bullets were a genuine possibility. That I was now seeing enough trees in one place that I could start to use the word forest didn't comfort me. It meant I would be even less likely to see any hunters in time enough to stop. I wasn't sure if I should slow down or speed up, I let the car choose its own speed.

The woods looked barren, mostly gray and dark, with an ominous sense of blood-red brooding, the soil and rocks were uncommonly colored. Anywhere else, the dry grass would have been waist-high and yellow. Here it was washed out and colorless. I've always loved wilderness, but this place felt unpleasant, and I couldn't wait to get past it.

As I came up a long shallow slope, I saw an incongruous flash of color directly ahead — a sparkle of blue and turquoise. At first I thought it was a T-shirt caught on the wire, then maybe a scarecrow or a dummy — I took my foot off the pedal to let the car coast — and then I was standing on the brakes, screeching to a frightening stop. It was a boy, barely a teenager, slender, almost petite. He was caught between the wires of the fence, frantically struggling to free himself. At the sound of the brakes, he raised his face to mine, he was painted in green and blue camouflage to match his skintight costume. He looked like — he had a surreal quality, like an animated painting. For an instant, I wasn't sure what I was seeing. But I could tell he was injured and in pain and frightened —

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I got out of the car, leaving the driver-side door hanging open, ran to the back of the camper and grabbed my red backpack — my emergency kit. Everything from Tums to toilet paper. Batteries, Band-Aids, water bottle, wet-wipes, aspirin, gauze, tape, Neosporin ointment, scissors, knife, plastic tableware, poncho, even a soft navy-blue blanket. I talked patiently and quietly to the boy as if he were a frightened animal. "It's all right, I'm a friend. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here to help you. Don't be afraid. I'll get you free from there. Do you have a name?"

He was making sounds in his throat that weren't words — at least, not words that I could identify. Liquid, hissing sounds. His hair was greenish, which suggested that his natural color was blond, but it was blue and dark beneath the green, so what did I know? His eyes were wide and almost Asian-looking. His skin had a kind of oily sheen, maybe it was the camouflage paint, but the closer I looked the less it looked like paint. Most face-painting isn't that detailed or as exquisite. It couldn't have been a tattoo — tats don't come in colors that clean and bright or with shading that subtle. He looked a little shiny, almost as if he were scaled like a fish; but he also looked as if he had soft downy fur as well; but overall, I had the weird sensation that he was as much a part of the plant world as the animal kingdom. He moved with a slow, silent grace — a bit like a dancer, but a bit like a willow waving in the wind.

I touched his shoulder. It startled me. He wasn't wearing a skin-tight shirt after all. This was his naked skin. He was naked all over, he was blue-green all over. Not blue-green like a corpse, but blue-green like a tropical plant. His feet were small; his toes were elongated and they looked webbed; I didn't have time to examine. He didn't seem to have any genitals, or maybe they were tucked within his genital slit, I couldn't tell; but he was definitely male in appearance and attitude. His bare skin was cool to the touch; not cold, but cool — as if he had spent most of the day naked in this high bright timberland. The air was crisp, but the sun was surprisingly warm; if he had been out in the sun for a while —

It didn't matter. He shivered at my touch, but he didn't draw back. I could see how he was tangled in the barbed-wire fence and how his skin was scratched and cut deeply in several places. On a hunch, I went pawing through the jetsam at the bottom of the backpack. I was in the habit of tossing loose tools into the pack rather than let them rattle around the

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camper shell, and I had been wiring in some new speakers a few months back, and I hadn't been able to find my wire-cutters anywhere in the house the next time I needed them, so I had been assuming since then that they were probably still in the camper — and yes, finally, my hand closed around the grip and I pulled the cutters free with a soft whispered, "Yes!"

The wire was stiff and thick, and these cutters were way too small for the job. I had to use both hands, and I don't have the strength in my arms and hands that I used to, but there's that strength that comes from adrenaline and fear, and somehow I finally snapped through the top wire and it *spanged* free and away, and then, I don't remember exactly how I did it, but I came up under the boy and lifted him off the wire, ending up with him half over my shoulder, I almost stumbled backward, but I came down on one knee, still holding him, cradling him, talking to him, while he made frightened noises in my arms, trembling and terrified, but too weak to run. I wrapped him in the blue blanket, it was a darker shade of blue and the color seemed to comfort him. He looked at me with sea-green eyes, so wide and questioning, I had the sense of both intimacy and alienness at the same time.

I had a brief moment to study his face. His ears — weren't ears, they were more like flower-cups uncurling, like the way fresh spears of grass unfurl; they pointed upward and gave his face an elfin quality. His nose was sharp and straight, with flaring nostrils, like a wild animal's. His mouth, wide and wild; his lips were dark and thin. For a moment, I had a flash of bright green teeth, maybe a little too sharp. I brushed his light blue-green hair off his darker blue-green forehead, a parental caress, and whispered again to him, "It's all right now, you're safe. You're going to be all right. I promise."

I don't know if he understood. Maybe he did. Maybe it was my imagination, maybe his trembling eased, maybe it didn't. Maybe he was too tired to fight anymore, and maybe he was relaxed enough in my arms to let me lift him away. Still cradling him, I carried him back to the camper. I laid him out on one of the beds, then hesitated. This boy was frightened of something sinister — frightened enough to try climbing naked through a barbed-wire fence. Both of the beds could be lifted up, revealing coffin-sized storage bins beneath. I opened the empty one and tucked the boy into it, wrapping him as warmly as possible. His wounds

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were seeping dark purple blood, but they weren't spurting, and for some reason, I had such a clear and present sense of danger, I knew it was important that we get out of there as quickly as possible. I reassured him again that everything would be all right, then closed the lid as gently as possible.

I grabbed the red backpack where I'd dropped it and scrambled back into the driver's seat, put the pickup in gear and eased the car forward. For a moment, I wanted to stand on the gas pedal, but that was probably a bad idea. Don't do anything suspicious-looking. Keep driving at the same casual speed. Forty to fifty miles per hour. Up through the foothills, up toward the dark stands of evergreens dotting the lower slopes of whatever range this was. Lassen? I'd lost my bearings.

A few minutes later, I came to a turnout — one of those inevitable Vista Point overlooks, where you could stand at the edge of the cliff and take pictures of whatever the locals considered a spectacular view. Sometimes it actually was spectacular, but most of the time it was just a lot of distance. I went to the back of the camper and opened the bed again, the boy was still trembling. His eyes flashed wildly, but he let me sit him up and I gave him a water bottle to suck on — one of those sport bottles that has a grown-up nipple; squeeze the bottle and it gushes into your mouth. The boy didn't know what to make of it until I squirted a little fresh water, then he sucked thirstily. His expression softened, he closed his eyes and let me examine his back and sides and even the scrapes across his belly. His wounds weren't as bad as I had feared, but he was streaked with dirt and mud and purple blood. He looked more green than blue now; maybe because he was warming up.

I opened the backpack and pulled out the gauze and tape and scissors and some wet-wipes. I cleaned his cuts as carefully as I could — that must have hurt, he flinched and whimpered a few times, but he didn't resist — I pressed gauze and tape over the worst, and pressed a few Band-Aids over the rest. But even with the water and the attention and all my fumbling attempts at comfort, I was still certain he needed to see a doctor. Or maybe the police. His back had been peppered with buckshot, down his right side, his right ass-cheek, and his upper thigh.

Only now did it occur to me to wonder what he was. Not who — *what*? The who in this equation was the who he was running from.

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Okay, look. I'd heard the stories about the green people of the northern forests. Who hasn't? But I never gave them any credibility. As far as I was concerned, the green people were just another convenient new mythology made up to fill the gap when Sasquatch and the Loch Ness monster and alien crop circles were all revealed as hoaxes. Apparently, the whole thing started when some treasure hunter, searching for D. B. Cooper's fabulous lost loot, came back instead with blurry cell phone pictures of something that could have been a green man, but just as easily could have been a moss-covered tree stump in a gray rainstorm. Not the most convincing evidence. Thanks a lot, Motorola. How come none of these specimens of cryptozoology ever show up in front of someone who has an eight megapixel Nikon?

And then I had this quick flash of what was going to happen when I — a so-called famous science fiction writer — showed up with a real live green person? It was bad enough when I dared to suggest that my son was a Martian. What was this going to do to my reputation? Well, at least, maybe they'd finally forget the goddamn tribbles. Screw it. This green boy was real and he was hurt and whatever else might be so in the universe, right now, this minute, his pain was intolerable to me.

I wrapped him in the blanket again; this time he didn't seem as frightened when I laid him down in the bin under the bed. I tossed the backpack in with him, down by his feet; there was more than enough room. Then I closed the lid. I thought for a moment, then dumped a bunch of stuff on top of both beds and the floor of the camper shell; dirty laundry, empty soft drink cups, a discarded box of half-eaten KFC, my freshly peeled-off socks from last night. I made it look as if I'd slept in there, unwashed, for a week — which wasn't too far from the truth, although I still had four days to go.

Easing the pickup back onto the road, I rolled north again, still cruising at a comfortably low speed, like a lost tourist enjoying the scenery anyway. The highway, such as it was, began winding upward through a series of switchbacks; the wire fences fell behind, and there were tall trees on either side of the road now, but some darker sense told me that I still hadn't left the domain of danger for myself and my passenger — probably it was the fact that I hadn't seen any turnoffs in miles. There was only one way in or out of this tract of land.

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As I drove, both my stomach and my thoughts were in uproar; and yet, at the same time, I had a clarity of vision that startled me — as if I were the writer of my own life, staring down at the screen, my fingers poised above the keyboard, considering what actions my protagonist would choose. In that moment, I think I finally understood the nature of heroism. You don't do heroic stuff because you want to, or because you have to, or even because it's the right thing to do. You do it because you do it — that's all. Because not doing it never even occurs to you.

Without thinking, I turned on the music-player. That would be the normal thing to do. And whatever else, I wanted to look as mundane as possible, just in case of whatever. I don't remember what was playing.

The whatever turned out to be a couple of Hummers parked across the road, almost but not quite blocking the access to what passed for a highway in this wilderness. I came left around a curve, up through a corridor of day-darkening pines, left around another curve, leading out to a cleared area, and there they were. Three of them stood in my way, and one more sat behind the wheel, talking to someone on the radio. They weren't exactly wearing uniforms, but their clothes suggested some official capacity. Cowboy hats and dark glasses. They moved like combat veterans. And two of them had rifles slung over their shoulders. High-powered rifles. I'm not a gun expert, I couldn't tell you what kind. But they had the kind of telescopic sights you see on sniper rifles in the spy thrillers.

One of them held up his hand, and I rolled to a stop. He came up to the driver side window and leaned down to look at me. His eyes were hidden behind his sunglasses and his face was shaded by his cowboy hat. He had ruddy skin, a little too ruddy perhaps, a bristly salt-and-pepper mustache, and he stank of sweat and cigar smoke. I was already fumbling for my driver's license, but he made no move to ask for it.

"You want to turn that off. That music."

One button, one touch. The speakers fell silent.

"Turn off your engine too."

I did so. The day was suddenly incredibly quiet.

"You're not from around here." It wasn't a question.

I decided to play stupid. Very stupid. I have a natural talent for that. I said, "I'm just driving north — working my way toward Seattle."

"Whyn't you take the Interstate?"

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"This old bucket? It's not safe. It only goes fifty downhill with a tailwind." That wasn't exactly true. Under the hood, the pickup was in excellent running condition, but keeping it dented and decrepit on the outside was a good way to be invisible to a lot of people.

I decided to push the issue. "Did I do something wrong, officer?"

He ignored both the question and the assumption. "You seen anything strange or unusual back there?"

I shook my head. "No one. No hitchhikers, nothing. Not even a deer. No, wait. I did see one deer, I think. Sniffing the fence. About two miles back." The deer wasn't a lie. "What should I have seen?"

He ignored this question too. "Can you open the back for me?" He stepped out of the way so I could open the car door. As I climbed down, I noticed that the two of them with rifles had casually walked back and positioned themselves to cover me...and the back of the truck. One of them had already unslung his weapon, but he wasn't pointing it at anything yet. Even so — this was a genuine "oh, shit!" moment. Even worse than the guy who might or might not have had a gun in his jacket pocket when he demanded my wallet in a rickety rackety rocketing New York City subway car — not the last night I ever stayed out past two in that city, but the last time I took the subway at that hour. After that, it was cabs. Even if I couldn't afford it.

I opened the back of the camper, and started to climb in — I made as if I was going to sit on the opposite bed, but his hand on my arm pulled me back. The stink of his sweat was overpowering, so I took a big step back.

He stuck his head into the camper shell, peered around, shook his head at the mess, gave me a glance that was both dispassionate and disparaging at the same time. He climbed in and lifted the cover on the right bunk. Underneath the thin mattress, the wooden frame was divided into three horizontal drawers. He pulled one of them open, I didn't remember what I'd tossed in there, I didn't even remember the last time I'd opened one of those drawers — and then I flushed with embarrassment. My buddy Miles is the accountant for an adult film company. We'd driven to Vegas in January. I went to the CES, he went to the Adult Entertainment Expo, whatever it was called. He came back with a box of flyers and magazines and sample discs. He'd paged through it, then handed it to me, I dumped it in the drawer with a mental note to throw it out someplace

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where I wouldn't be publicly embarrassed, and then I'd forgotten it. Oops.

I was now known in this guy's eyes as the embarrassed owner of *Sluts and Slobs*, *Granny Takes a Tinkle*, and *Gay Boys in Bondage*. "You some kinda faggot?" he asked.

"Um, not recently, I don't think — " I couldn't believe what was falling out of my mouth. Celibacy by popular demand is not exactly something you brag about.

And then my cell phone rang.

I answered it.

It was the kid. "Hello, Daddy!" Other people might think it bizarre that a twenty-two-year-old young man would still call me "Daddy," but that was his way of being playful.

"Hi, sweetheart!" I responded.

"Where are you?"

"Um, I'm not sure. I'd have to look at the map. I think I'm in Lassen National Forest. Or close to it, maybe. Somewhere north of Red Bluff, I think. I can't talk now. I'm with a couple of rangers or highway patrolmen or — something."

"Are you getting a ticket — ?"

"Nah. We're just talking about stuff, nothing important. I think I took a wrong turn. They're giving me directions now. Listen, I'll call you back in a little while, okay?" I turned to the men and gave them a weak smile. That might have saved my life. Not the smile, the conversation.

The man who stank of cigars and sweat said, "That your boy friend?" He didn't wait for my answer, he turned to his partners. "I think we got us a sissy here." I stood paralyzed. If he'd said something like, "He sure got a purty mouth," I probably would have fainted in fear. But instead, he simply dismissed me. "Let him go. He ain't nothin' — nothin' at all."

With obvious disdain, he threw the magazines back into the camper, as if I was something dirty and he was obviously sorry he'd gotten this close. "What's in Seattle?" he asked. "The AIDS clinic?"

"Um — " I didn't answer. Yes, no, whatever. Anything I might say would be dangerous. I just stood there dumbly. Like I said, I'm pretty good at playing stupid.

"Right. Okay, here's what you're going to do. You're going to get back into your piece-of-shit pickup, you're going to get onto that highway up

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there, you're going to turn left, and you're going to get your ass out of here. And you are never going to drive on this road again, right? Nod your head. This isn't television."

I nodded my head. I closed the camper door. I got back behind the steering wheel. He pushed my door shut with deliberate force. I fumbled my seat belt on, felt it click. I started my engine. I put the pickup in gear. The fellow in the second Hummer eased it backward to give me more than enough room to pass. I guess he didn't want sissy-cooties on his shiny black war machine. I rolled cautiously forward, up onto the highway, and turned left toward the west. It wasn't the direction I wanted to go, but it was the direction I was going to go.

Now I was on a highway that had turnouts and turnoffs again, even the occasional road sign. It was ten miles before my heartbeat returned to normal and maybe another ten miles before I started to feel that maybe it might be safe to find a place to pull over and check on my passenger. Finally, I pulled up in front of an abandoned something — maybe it had been a gas station or a bait shop or a place that sold beef jerky; today it was just an old wooden shell of brown boards turning black.

I went to the back of the camper. The door was swinging open. I lifted the lid of the left bunk. The boy was gone. The blanket was still there, and so were some of the purple-bloodstained bandages. And a half-finished bottle of water. He must have jumped out somewhere. I hadn't felt a thing up front. Aww, jeez. That poor kid.

Or maybe not. Maybe he was safer in the wilderness than anywhere else. His wounds hadn't looked life-threatening, just really uncomfortable. But if I'd brought him to the attention of the public authorities, he probably would never have had a chance to get back home, wherever that was. This way, at least he was free again. Maybe. Probably.

I closed the bunk and sat down on the opposite one and just shook for a while. Then I opened a plastic trash bag and cleaned up the mess in the back of the camper as well as I could. Picked up the used food containers, picked up the dirty laundry, folded what needed to be folded, stacked what could be stacked, even emptied the drawers of their pornographic cargo, the various motel and gas station receipts, everything that had my name and address on it. I'd find a safe anonymous place to dump this trash, some Dumpster™ (Yes, really — ™!) behind the Wal-Mart or something like

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that. I popped open another plastic bag and gathered up all the evidence of the green boy; the bloodstained blanket, the bandages, the water bottle. Maybe there was some DNA or something I could use to prove what had happened. Or maybe I should just throw that stuff away too and be completely done with it. Except, I hate mysteries. I hate not knowing.

I'm not going to say where I ended up. Maybe it was Seattle. But it could just as easily have been Medford or Portland or Tacoma or Bellingham or Vancouver. Or someplace else I haven't mentioned. I'm only going to say that it was after dark when I finally pulled up in front of Dennis and Jay's house. (Not their real names.) They told me afterward that they'd never seen me in such a disheveled and discombobulated condition. Fortunately, Jay has the fabled recipe for cancer-curing chicken soup, and Dennis is an active practitioner of the Sturgeon school of Buddhism, he listens without judgment, so by the end of the next day, they had a pretty good idea of the landscape of mental states I'd driven through, and if not the actual facts of the incidents that had occurred, at least a fairly accurate account of the discoordinated way I'd experienced them.

Okay, I have to gloss over some stuff now. I know this is bad storytelling, but this isn't exactly a story, and I have to protect the other people involved. I don't know if Dennis and Jay believed me about the green boy, but they knew people who knew people who might believe. Dennis got on the phone and after a while, some other people came over and looked at the bloodstained blanket and bandages, and that was enough to get them curious, if not convinced, so we talked for a while; they told me that sightings of the green people weren't uncommon in the northwest. Like I said, it's part of the local mythology. But just the same, there aren't a lot of people who take it serious enough to actually go looking for the greenies. But could they take one of the bloodstained Band-Aids over to the university anyway? I said yes and then, what with one thing and another, a couple of days later, I was taken to meet some more people, maybe scientists, maybe just ex-hippies, I wasn't sure, nobody was saying a lot — but after a couple days more, this is what was decided. Four of us are going back to that private hunting reserve. One brooding driver, two of them, and me. I don't know why I said yes, or maybe I do. Maybe it's because I just have to know for sure.

We're going to outfit ourselves for a week of backpacking, we're going

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to rent a car and drive south for a day, I'm pretty sure I can find that road again, we're going to drive down to that field with the rocky red boulders and we're going to stop the car. Three of us are going to get out. We're going to cut our way into the fence and we're going to start hiking north toward the place where the stream forks. We're taking three digital cameras and an HDTV camcorder, one of the new small Sony ones. We'll have a GPS and a radio-transceiver and a U.S. Geological Survey map. We'll have enough food and water for five days. We'll have a prearranged pickup point at the top end of the territory. Our driver will meet us there. We'll be wearing mountain-camo and we'll stay as invisible as possible.

If there are green people in those woods, we'll find them and we'll photograph them. If there are hunters there, we'll photograph them too.

Yes, what we are doing is risky and dangerous. Maybe I'm leaping to conclusions — but what do writers do? We practice every day for the Olympic Conclusion Jump. We connect dots everywhere — even the dots on the neighbor's Dalmatian. We create paranoid fantasies. We plot revenge. We imagine villains. We create plots of all kinds. And the only difference between a writer and a real psychotic is that the psychotic doesn't get paid for his madness.

So, yeah, why should anyone be surprised when the madness occasionally bleeds over into a writer's daily life. It's supposed to be contagious. All writing is an attempt to infect the reader with the author's delusions. Maybe this and maybe that and maybe not, who knows?

Maybe the kind of person who stinks of sweat and cigars and presumes the authority to stop other people's cars and burrow through their belongings and judge them by what he finds is also the kind of person who hunts down green children in the woods. Maybe he and his companions are even the kind of people who would execute anyone who finds out the truth. Maybe there are secrets there. And maybe there aren't. There's only one way to be sure. And maybe I really do have a smidgen of courage after all.

So, that's the point, Gordon. If there's nothing there, then this is just another paranoid fantasy, and you can pay me for it and publish it at your convenience, and then later on, we'll all have a good laugh at my expense at the next banquet or convention. People can talk about how David's writing is a good substitute for institutionalization; it's work-therapy

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from the outpatient clinic and thank goodness he's found a productive outlet to sublimate his wilder fantasies. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

But on the other hand, if I'm not at the banquet, and if you haven't heard from me in a while, and if I'm not answering my e-mail or picking up my phone, and if nobody knows where I am — well, I've enclosed a map with this manuscript. Tell the people searching for my body to start at the red X and hike north toward the place where the stream forks.

(signed) Your Pal,
David Gerrold

"I decided to test the premise that I'm your best friend."

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Bruce Sterling reports that in 2005 he received an honorary doctorate from Art Center College of Design in California. He also teaches sometimes at the European Graduate School in Switzerland. So nowadays, he says, "I'm 'Professor-Doktor Sterling,' but I didn't even shine my shoes or get a haircut." He also mentions that he's hard at work on a new sf novel. His new story is a fine work of speculative fiction.

Kiosk

By Bruce Sterling

I.

THE FABRIKATOR WAS UGLY, noisy, a fire hazard, and it smelled. Borislav got it for the kids in the neighborhood.

One snowy morning, in his work gloves, long coat, and fur hat, he loudly power-sawed through the wall of his kiosk. He duct-taped and stapled the fabrikator into place.

The neighborhood kids caught on instantly. His new venture was a big hit.

The fabrikator made little plastic toys from 3-D computer models. After a week, the fab's dirt-cheap toys literally turned into dirt. The fabbed toys just crumbled away, into a waxy, non-toxic substance that the smaller kids tended to chew.

Borislav had naturally figured that the brief lifetime of these toys might discourage the kids from buying them. This just wasn't so. This wasn't a bug: this was a feature. Every day after school, an eager gang of kids clustered around Borislav's green kiosk. They slapped down their

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tinny pocket change with mittened hands. Then they exulted, quarreled, and sometimes even punched each other over the shining fab-cards.

The happy kid would stick the fab-card (adorned with some glossily fraudulent pic of the toy) into the fabrikator's slot. After a hot, deeply exciting moment of hissing, spraying, and stinking, the fab would burp up a freshly minted dinosaur, baby doll, or toy fireman.

Foot traffic always brought foot traffic. The grownups slowed as they crunched the snowy street. They cast an eye at the many temptations ranked behind Borislav's windows. Then they would impulse-buy. A football scarf, maybe. A pack of tissues for a sneezy nose.

Once again he was ahead of the game: the only kiosk in town with a fabrikator.

The fabrikator spoke to him as a veteran street merchant. Yes, it definitely *meant something* that those rowdy kids were so eager to buy toys that fell apart and turned to dirt. Any kiosk was all about high-volume repeat business. The stick of gum. The candy bar. The cheap, last-minute bottle-of-booze. The glittery souvenir keychain that tourists would never use for any purpose whatsoever. These objects were the very stuff of a kiosk's life.

Those colored plastic cards with the 3-D models.... The cards had potential. The older kids were already collecting the cards: not the toys that the cards made, but the cards themselves.

And now, this very day, from where he sat in his usual street-cockpit behind his walls of angled glass, Borislav had taken the next logical step. He offered the kids ultra-glossy, overpriced, collector cards that could not and would not make toys. And of course — there was definitely logic here — the kids were going nuts for that business model. He had sold a hundred of them.

Kids, by the nature of kids, weren't burdened with a lot of cash. Taking their money was not his real goal. What the kids brought to his kiosk was what kids had to give him — futurity. Their little churn of street energy — that was the symptom of something bigger, just over the horizon. He didn't have a word for that yet, but he could feel it, in the way he felt a coming thunderstorm inside his aching leg.

Futurity might bring a man money. Money never saved a man with no future.

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II.

Dr. Grootjans had a jaw like a horse, a round blue pillbox of a hat, and a stiff winter coat that could likely stop gunfire. She carried a big European shopping wand.

Ace was acting as her official street-guide, an unusual situation, since Ace was the local gangster. "Madame," Ace told her, "this is the finest kiosk in the city. Boots here is our philosopher of kiosks. Boots has a fabrikator! He even has a water fountain!"

Dr. Grootjans carefully photographed the water fountain's copper pipe, plastic splash basin, and disposable paper pop-out cups. "Did my guide just call you 'Boots?'" she said. "Boots as in footgear?"

"Everybody calls me that."

Dr. Grootjans patted her translation earpiece, looking pleased. "This water-fountain is the exhaust from your fuel cell."

Borislav rubbed his mustache. "When I first built my kiosk here, the people had no running water."

Dr. Grootjans waved her digital wand over his selections of panty-hose. She photographed the rusty bolts that fixed his kiosk to the broken pavement. She took particular interest in his kiosk's peaked roof. People often met their friends and lovers at Borislav's kiosk, because his towering satellite dish was so easy to spot. With its painted plywood base and showy fringes of snipped copper, the dish looked fit for a minaret.

"Please try on this pretty necklace, madame! Made by a fine artist, she lives right up the street. Very famous. Artistic. Valuable. Regional. Handmade!"

"Thank you, I will. Your shop is a fine example of the local small-to-micro regional enterprise. I must make extensive acquisitions for full study by the Parliamentary committee."

Borislav swiftly handed over a sheet of flimsy. Ace peeled off a gaping plastic bag and commenced to fill it with candy bars, placemats, hand-knitted socks, peasant dolls in vests and angular headdresses, and religious-war press-on tattoos. "He has such variety, madame! Such unusual goods!"

Borislav leaned forward through his cash window, so as to keep Dr. Grootjans engaged as Ace crammed her bags. "Madame, I don't care to boast about my modest local wares.... Because whatever I sell is due to the

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people! You see, dear doctor-madame, every object desired by these colorful local people has a folk-tale to tell us...."

Dr. Grootjan's pillbox hat rose as she lifted her brows. "A folk tale, did you say?"

"Yes, it's the people's poetry of commerce! Certain products appear...the products flow through my kiosk...I present them pleasingly, as best I can.... Then, the people buy them, or they just don't buy!"

Dr. Grootjans expertly flapped open a third shopping bag. "An itemized catalog of all your goods would be of great interest to my study committee."

Borislav put his hat on.

Dr. Grootjans bored in. "I need the *complete, digital* inventory of your merchandise. The working file of the full contents of your store. Your commercial records from the past five years will be useful in spotting local consumer trends."

Borislav gazed around his thickly packed shelving. "You mean you want a list of everything I sell in here? Who would ever find the time?"

"It's simple! You must have heard of the European Unified Electronic Product Coding System." Dr. Grootjans tucked the shopping wand into her canvas purse, which bore an imperial logo of thirty-five golden stars in a widening spiral. "I have a smart-ink brochure here which displays in your local language. Yes, here it is: 'A Partial Introduction to EU-EPCS Regulatory Adoption Procedures.'"

Borislav refused her busily flashing inkware. "Oh yes, word gets around about that electric barcoding nonsense! Those fancy radio-ID stickers of yours. Yes, yes, I'm sure those things are just fine for rich foreign people with shopping-wands!"

"Sir, if you sensibly deployed this electronic tracking system, you could keep complete, real-time records of all your merchandise. Then you would know exactly what's selling, and not. You could fully optimize your product flow, reduce waste, maximize your profit, and benefit the environment through reduced consumption."

Borislav stared at her. "You've given this speech before, haven't you?"

"Of course I have! It's a critical policy issue! The modern Internet-of-Things authenticates goods, reduces spoilage, and expedites secure cross-border shipping!"

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"Listen, madame doctor: your fancy bookkeeping won't help me if I don't know the soul of the people! I have a little kiosk! I never compete with those big, faceless mall stores! If you want that sort of thing, go shop in your five-star hotel!"

Dr. Grootjans lowered her sturdy purse and her sharp face softened into lines of piety. "I don't mean to violate your quaint local value system.... Of course we fully respect your cultural differences.... Although there will be many tangible benefits when your regime fully harmonizes with European procedures."

"'My regime,' is it? Ha!" Borislav thumped the hollow floor of his kiosk with his cane. "This stupid regime crashed all their government computers! Along with crashing our currency, I might add! Those crooks couldn't run that fancy system of yours in a thousand years!"

"A comprehensive debate on this issue would be fascinating!" Dr. Grootjans waited expectantly, but, to her disappointment, no such debate followed. "Time presses," she told him at last. "May I raise the subject of a complete acquisition?"

Borislav shrugged. "I never argue with a lady or a paying customer. Just tell what you want."

Dr. Grootjans sketched the air with her starry wand. "This portable shelter would fit onto an embassy truck."

"Are you telling me that you want to *buy my entire kiosk*?"

"I'm advancing that option now, yes."

"What a scandal! Sell you my kiosk? The people would never forgive me!"

"Kiosks are just temporary structures. I can see your business is improving. Why not open a permanent retail store? Start over in a new, more stable condition. Then you'd see how simple and easy regulatory adoption can be!"

Ace swung a heavily laden shopping bag from hand to hand. "Madame, be reasonable! This street just can't be the same without this kiosk!"

"You do have severe difficulties with inventory management. So, I will put a down-payment on the contents of your store. Then," she turned to Ace, "I will hire you as the inventory consultant. We will need every object named, priced and cataloged. As soon as possible. Please."

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* * *

Borislav lived with his mother on the ground floor of a local apartment building. This saved him trouble with his bad leg. When he limped through the door, his mother was doing her nails at the kitchen table, with her hair in curlers and her feet in a sizzling foot-bath.

Borislav sniffed at the stew, then set his cane aside and sat in a plastic chair. "Mama dear, heaven knows we've seen our share of bad times."

"You're late tonight, poor boy! What ails you?"

"Mama, I just sold my entire stock! Everything in the kiosk! All sold, at one great swoop! For hard currency, too!" Borislav reached into the pocket of his long coat. "This is the best business day I've ever had!"

"Really?"

"Yes! It's fantastic! Ace really came through for me — he brought his useful European idiot, and she bought the whole works! Look, I've saved just one special item, just for you."

She raised her glasses on a neck-chain. "Are these new fabbing cards?"

"No, Mama. These fine souvenir playing cards feature all the stars from your favorite Mexican soap operas. These are the originals, still in their wrapper! That's authentic cellophane!"

His mother blew on her wet scarlet nails, not daring to touch her prize. "Cellophane! Your father would be so proud!"

"You're going to use those cards very soon, Mama. Your Saint's-Day is coming up. We're going to have a big bridge party for all your girlfriends. The boys at the Three Cats are going to cater it! You won't have to lift one pretty finger!"

Her mascaraed eyes grew wide. "Can we afford that?"

"I've already arranged it! I talked to Mirko who runs the Three Cats, and I hired Mirko's weird gay brother-in-law to decorate that empty flat upstairs. You know — that flat nobody wants to rent, where that mob guy shot himself. When your old girls see how we've done that place up, word will get around. We'll have new tenants in no time!"

"You're really fixing the haunted flat, son?"

Borislav changed his winter boots for his wooly house slippers. "That's right, Mama. That haunted flat is gonna be a nice little earner."

"It's got a ghost in it."

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"Not anymore, it doesn't. From now on, we're gonna call that place...what was that French word he used? — we'll call it the 'atelier!'"

"The 'atelier!' Really! My heart's all a-flutter!"

Borislav poured his mother a stiff shot of her favorite digestive.

"Mama, maybe this news seems sudden, but I've been expecting this. Business has been looking up. Real life is changing, for the real people in this world. The people like us!" Borislav poured himself a brimming cup of flavored yogurt. "Those fancy foreigners, they don't even understand what the people are doing here today!"

"I don't understand all this men's political talk."

"Well, I can see it on their faces. I know what the people want. The people.... They want a new life."

She rose from her chair, shaking a little. "I'll heat up your stew. It's getting so late."

"Listen to me, Mama. Don't be afraid of what I say. I promise you something. You're going to die on silk sheets. That's what this means. That's what I'm telling you. There's gonna be a handsome priest at your bedside, and the oil and the holy water, just like you always wanted. A big granite headstone for you, Mama, with big golden letters."

As he ate his stew, she began to weep with joy.

AFTER SUPPER, Borislav ignored his mother's usual nagging about his lack of a wife. He limped down to the local sports bar for some serious drinking. Borislav didn't drink much anymore, because the kiosk scanned him whenever he sat inside it. It used a cheap superconductive loop, woven through the fiberboard walls. The loop's magnetism flowed through his body, revealing his bones and tissues on his laptop screen. Then the scanner compared the state of his body to its records of past days, and it coughed up a medical report.

This machine was a cheap, pirated copy of some hospital's fancy medical scanner. There had been some trouble in spreading that technology, but with the collapse of public health systems, people had to take some matters into their own hands. Borislav's health report was not cheery. He had plaque in major arteries. He had some seed-pearl kidney-stones. His teeth needed attention. Worst of all, his right leg had been

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wrecked by a land mine. The shinbone had healed with the passing years, but it had healed badly. The foot below his old wound had bad circulation.

Age was gripping his body, visible right there on the screen. Though he could witness himself growing old, there wasn't much he could do about that.

Except, that is, for his drinking. Borislav had been fueled by booze his entire adult life, but the alcohol's damage was visibly spreading through his organs. Lying to himself about that obvious fact simply made him feel like a fool. So, nowadays, he drank a liter of yogurt a day, chased with eco-correct paper cartons of multivitamin fruit juices, European-approved, licensed, and fully patented. He did that grumpily and he resented it deeply, but could see on the screen that it was improving his health.

So, no more limping, pitching and staggering, poetically numbed, down the midnight streets. Except for special occasions, that is. Occasions like this one.

Borislav had a thoughtful look around the dimly lit haunt of the old Homeland Sports Bar. So many familiar faces lurking in here — his daily customers, most of them. The men were bundled up for winter. Their faces were rugged and lined. Shaving and bathing were not big priorities for them. They were also drunk.

But the men wore new, delicately tinted glasses. They had nice haircuts. Some had capped their teeth. The people were prospering.

Ace sat at his favorite table, wearing a white cashmere scarf, a tailored jacket and a dandified beret. Five years earlier, Ace would have had his butt royally kicked for showing up at the Homeland Sports Bar dressed like an Italian. But the times were changing at the Homeland.

Bracing himself with his cane, Borislav settled into a torn chair beneath a gaudy flat-screen display, where the Polish football team were making fools of the Dutch.

"So, Ace, you got it delivered?"

Ace nodded. "Over at the embassy, they are weighing, tagging and analyzing every single thing you sell."

"That old broad's not as stupid as she acts, you know."

"I know that. But when she saw that cheese-grater that can chop glass. The tiling caulk that was also a dessert!" Ace half-choked on the local cognac. "And the skull adjuster! God in heaven!"

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Borislav scowled. "That skull adjuster is a great product! It'll chase a hangover away — " Borislav snapped his fingers loudly " — just like that!"

The waitress hurried over. She was a foreign girl who barely spoke the language, but there were a lot of such girls in town lately. Borislav pointed at Ace's drink. "One of those, missie, and keep 'em coming."

"That skull squeezer of yours is a torture device. It's weird, it's nutty. It's not even made by human beings."

"So what? So it needs a better name and a nicer label. 'The Craniette,' some nice brand-name. Manufacture it in pink. Emboss some flowers on it."

"Women will never squeeze their skulls with that crazy thing."

"Oh yes they will. Not old women from old Europe, no. But some will. Because I've seen them do it. I sold ten of those! The people want it!"

"You're always going on about 'what the people want.'"

"Well, that's it! That's our regional competitive advantage! The people who live here, they have a very special relationship to the market economy." Borislav's drink arrived. He downed his shot.

"The people here," he said, "they're used to seeing markets wreck their lives and turn everything upside down. That's why we're finally the ones setting the hot new trends in today's world, while the Europeans are trying to catch up with us! These people here, they *love* the new commercial products with no human origin!"

"Dr. Grootjans stared at that thing like it had come from Mars."

"Ace, the free market always makes sense — once you get to know how it works. You must have heard of the 'invisible hand of the market.'"

Ace downed his cognac and looked skeptical.

"The invisible hand — that's what gives us products like the skull-squeezer. That's *easy* to understand."

"No it isn't. Why would the invisible hand squeeze people's heads?"

"Because it's a search engine! It's mining the market data for new opportunities. The bigger the market, the more it tries to break in by automatically generating new products. And that headache-pill market, that's one of the world's biggest markets!"

Ace scratched under his armpit holster. "How big is that market, the world market for headaches?"

"It's huge! Every convenience store sells painkillers. Little packets of

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two and three pills, with big price markups. What are those pills all about? The needs and wants of the people!"

"Miserable people?"

"Exactly! People who hate their jobs, bitter people who hate their wives and husbands. The market for misery is always huge." Borislav knocked back another drink. "I'm talking too much tonight."

"Boots, I need you to talk to me. I just made more money for less work than I have in a long time. Now I'm even on salary inside a foreign embassy. This situation's getting serious. I need to know the philosophy — how an invisible hand makes real things. I gotta figure that out before the Europeans do."

"It's a market search engine for an Internet-of-Things."

Ace lifted and splayed his fingers. "Look, tell me something I can get my hands on. You know. Something that a man can steal."

"Say you type two words at random: any two words. Type those two words into an Internet search engine. What happens?"

Ace twirled his shot glass. "Well, a search engine always hits on something, that's for sure. Something stupid, maybe, but always something."

"That's right. Now imagine you put two *products* into a search engine for things. So let's say it tries to sort and mix together...a parachute and a pair of shoes. What do you get from that kind of search?"

Ace thought it over. "I get it. You get a shoe that blows up a plane."

Borislav shook his head. "No, no. See, that is your problem right there. You're in the racket, you're a fixer. So you just don't think commercially."

"How can I outthink a machine like that?"

"You're doing it right now, Ace. Search engines have no ideas, no philosophy. They never think at all. Only people think and create ideas. Search engines are just programmed to search through what people want. Then they just mix, and match, and spit up some results. Endless results. Those results don't matter, though, unless the people want them. And here, the people want them!"

The waitress brought a bottle, peppered sauerkraut, and a leathery loaf of bread. Ace watched her hips sway as she left. "Well, as for me, I could go for some of *that*. Those Iraqi chicks have got it going on."

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Borislav leaned on his elbows and ripped up a mouthful of bread. He poured another shot, downed it, then fell silent as the booze stole up on him in a rush. He was suddenly done with talk.

Talk wasn't life. He'd seen real life. He knew it well. He'd first seen real life as a young boy, when he saw a whole population turned inside out. Refugees, the unemployed, the dispossessed, people starting over with pencils in a tin cup, scraping a living out of suitcases. Then people moving into stalls and kiosks. "Transition," that's what they named that kind of life. As if it were all going somewhere in particular.

The world changed a lot in a Transition. Life changed. But the people never transitioned into any rich nation's notion of normal life. In the next big "transition," the twenty-first-century one, the people lost everything they had gained.

When Borislav crutched back, maimed, from the outbreak of shooting-and-looting, he threw a mat on the sidewalk. He sold people boots. The people needed his boots, even indoors, because there was no more fuel in the pipelines and the people were freezing.

Come summer, he got hold of a car. Whenever there was diesel or biofuel around, he sold goods straight from its trunk. He made some street connections. He got himself a booth on the sidewalk.

Even in the rich countries, the lights were out and roads were still. The sky was empty of jets. It was a hard Transition. Civilization was wounded.

Then a contagion swept the world. Economic depression was bad, but a plague was a true Horseman of the Apocalypse. Plague thundered through a city. Plague made a city a place of thawing ooze, spontaneous fires, awesome deadly silences.

Borislav moved from his booth into the freezing wreck of a warehouse, where the survivors sorted and sold the effects of the dead. Another awful winter. They burned furniture to stay warm. When they coughed, people stared in terror at their handkerchiefs. Food shortages, too, this time: the dizzy edge of famine. Crazy times.

He had nothing left of that former life but his pictures. During the mayhem, he took thousands of photographs. That was something to mark the day, to point a lens, to squeeze a button, when there was nothing else to do, except to hustle, or sit and grieve, or jump from a bridge. He still had all those pictures, every last one of them. Everyday photographs of

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extraordinary times. His own extraordinary self: he was young, gaunt, wounded, hungry, burning-eyed.

As long as a man could recognize his own society, then he could shape himself to fit its circumstances. He might be a decent man, dependable, a man of his word. But when the society itself was untenable, when it just could not be sustained — then "normality" cracked like a cheap plaster mask. Beneath the mask of civilization was another face: the face of a cannibal child.

Only hope mattered then: the will to carry on through another day, another night, with the living strength of one's own heartbeat, without any regard for abstract notions of success or failure. In real life, to live was the only "real."

In the absence of routine, in the vivid presence of risk and suffering, the soul grew. Objects changed their primal nature. Their value grew as keen as tears, as keen as kisses. Hot water was a miracle. Electric light meant instant celebration. A pair of boots was the simple, immediate reason that your feet had not frozen and turned black. A man who had toilet paper, insulation, candles: he was the people's hero.

When you handed a woman a tube of lipstick, her pinched and pallid face lit up all over. She could smear that scarlet on her lips, and when she walked down the darkened street it was as if she were shouting aloud, as if she were singing.

When the plague burned out — it was a flu, and it was a killer, but it was not so deadly as the numb despair it inspired — then a profiteer's fortune beckoned to those tough enough to knock heads and give orders. Borislav made no such fortune. He knew very well how such fortunes were made, but he couldn't give the orders. He had taken orders himself, once. Those were orders he should never have obeyed.

Like a stalled train, civilization slowly rattled back into motion, with its usual burden of claptrap. The life he had now, in the civilized moving train, it was a parody of that past life. That burning, immediate life. He had even been in love then.

Today, he lived inside his kiosk. It was a pretty nice kiosk, today. Only a fool could fail to make a living in good times. He took care, he improvised, so he made a profit. He was slowly buying up some flats in an old apartment building, an ugly, unloved place, but sturdy and well-located.

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When old age stole over him, when he was too weak to hustle in the market anymore, then he would live on the rents.

A football team scored on the big flat screen. The regulars cheered and banged their flimsy tables. Borislav raised his heavy head, and the bar's walls reeled as he came to himself. He was such a cheap drunk now; he would really have to watch that.

MORNING WAS PAINFUL. Borislav's mother tiptoed in with muesli, yogurt, and coffee. Borislav put his bad foot into his mother's plastic footbath — that treatment often seemed to help him — and he paged through a crumbling yellow block of antique newspapers. The old arts district had always been a bookish place, and these often showed up in attics. Borislav never read the ancient "news" in the newspapers, which, during any local regime, consisted mostly of official lies. Instead, he searched for the strange things that the people had once desired.

Three huge, universal, dead phenomena haunted these flaking pages: petroleum cars, cinema, and cigarettes. The cars heavily dragged along their hundreds of objects and services: fuels, pistons, mufflers, makers of sparks. The cigarettes had garish paper packages, with lighters, humidors, and special trays just for their ashes. As for the movie stars, they were driving the cars and smoking the cigarettes.

The very oldest newspapers were downright phantasmagoric. All the newspapers, with their inky, frozen graphics, seemed to scream at him across their gulf of decades. The dead things harangued, they flattered, they shamed, they jostled each other on the paper pages. They bled margin-space, they wept ink.

These things were strange, and yet, they had been desired. At first with a sense of daring, and then with a growing boldness, Borislav chose certain dead items to be digitally copied and revived. He re-released them into the contemporary flow of goods. For instance, by changing its materials and proportions, he'd managed to transform a Soviet-era desk telephone into a lightweight plastic rain-hat. No one had ever guessed the origin of his experiments. Unlike the machine-generated new products — always slotted with such unhuman coolness into market niches — these revived goods stank of raw humanity. Raw purpose. Raw desire.

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Once, there had been no Internet. And no Internet-of-Things, either, for that could only follow. There had only been the people. People wanting things, trying to make other people want their things. Capitalism, socialism, communism, those mattered little enough. Those were all period arrangements in a time that had no Internet.

The day's quiet study restored Borislav's good spirits. Next morning, his mother recommenced her laments about her lack of a daughter-in-law. Borislav left for work.

He found his kiosk pitifully stripped and empty, with a CLOSED sign in its damp-spotted window. A raw hole loomed in the wall where the fabrikator had been torn free. This sudden loss of all his trade-goods gave him a lofty thrill of panic.

Borislav savored that for a moment, then put the fear behind him. The neighborhood still surrounded his kiosk. The people would nourish it. He had picked an excellent location, during the darkest days. Once he'd sold them dirty bags of potatoes here, they'd clamored for wilted carrots. This life was easy now. This life was like a good joke.

He limped through the biometric door and turned on the lights.

Now, standing inside, he felt the kiosk's true nature. A kiosk was a conduit. It was a temporary stall in the endless flow of goods.

His kiosk was fiberboard and glue: recycled materials, green and modern. It had air filters, insulated windows, a rugged little fuel cell, efficient lights, a heater grill in the floor. It had password-protected intrusion alarms. It had a medical scanner in the walls. It had smart-ink wallpaper with peppy graphics.

They had taken away his custom-shaped chair, and his music player, loaded with a fantastic mashed-up mulch of the complete pop hits of the twentieth century. He would have to replace those. That wouldn't take him long.

He knelt on the bare floor, and taped a thick sheet of salvaged cardboard over the wintry hole in his wall. A loud rap came at his window. It was Fleka the Gypsy, one of his suppliers.

Borislav rose and stepped outside, reflexively locking his door, since this was Fleka. Fleka was the least dependable of his suppliers, because Fleka had no sense of time. Fleka could make, fetch, or filch most anything, but if you dared to depend on his word, Fleka would suddenly remember the wedding of some gypsy cousin, and vanish.

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"I heard about your good luck, Boots," grinned Fleka. "Is the maestro in need of new stock?"

Borislav rapped the empty window with his cane. "It's as you see."

Fleka slid to the trunk of his rusty car and opened it.

"Whatever that is," said Borislav at once, "it's much too big."

"Give me one minute from your precious schedule, maestro," said Fleka. "You, my kind old friend, with your lovely kiosk so empty, I didn't bring you any goods. I brought you a factory! So improved! So new!"

"That thing's not new, whatever it is."

"See, it's a fabrikator! Just like the last fabrikator I got for you, only this one is bigger, fancy and much better! I got it from my cousin."

"I wasn't born yesterday, Fleka."

Fleka hustled under his back seat and brought out a sample. It was a rotund doll of the American actress, Marilyn Monroe. The doll was still unpainted. It was glossily black.

Marilyn Monroe, the ultimate retail movie-star, was always recognizable, due to her waved coif, her lip-mole, and her torpedo-like bust. The passage of a century had scarcely damaged her shelf-appeal. The woman had become an immortal cartoon, like Betty Boop.

Fleka popped a hidden seam under Marilyn's jutting bust. Inside the black Marilyn doll was a smaller Marilyn doll, also jet-black, but wearing less clothing. Then came a smaller, more risqué little Marilyn, and then a smaller one yet, and finally a crudely modeled little Marilyn, shiny black, nude, and the size of Borislav's thumb.

"Nice celebrity branding," Borislav admitted. "So what's this material?" It seemed to be black china.

"It's not wax, like that other fabrikator. This is carbon. Little straws of carbon. It came with the machine."

Borislav ran his thumbnail across the grain of the material. The black Marilyn doll was fabricated in ridges, like the grooves in an ancient gramophone record. Fabs were always like that: they jet-sprayed their things by piling up thin layers, they stacked them up like pancakes. "'Little straws of carbon.' I never heard of that."

"I'm telling you what my cousin told me. 'Little nano tubes, little nano carbon.' That's what he said." Fleka grabbed the round Marilyn doll like a football goalie, and raised both his hands overhead. Then, with all

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his wiry strength, he smacked the black doll against the rust-eaten roof of his car. Chips flew.

"You've ruined her!"

"That was my car breaking," Fleka pointed out. "I made this doll this morning, out of old plans and scans from the Net. Then I gave it to my nephew, a nice big boy. I told him to break the doll. He broke a crowbar on this doll."

Borislav took the black doll again, checked the seams and detailing, and rapped it with his cane. "You sell these dolls to anyone else, Fleka?"

"Not yet."

"I could move a few of these. How much you asking?"

Fleka spread his hands. "I can make more. But I don't know how to make the little straws of carbon. There's a tutorial inside the machine. But it's in Polish. I hate tutorials."

Borislav examined the fabrikator. The machine looked simple enough: it was a basic black shell, a big black hopper, a black rotating plate, a black spraying nozzle, and the black gearing of a 3-D axis. "Why is this thing so black?"

"It's nice and shiny, isn't it? The machine itself is made of little straws of carbon."

"Your cousin got you this thing? Where's the brand name? Where's the serial number?"

"I swear he didn't steal it! This fabrikator is a copy, see. It's a pirate copy of another fabrikator in Warsaw. But nobody knows it's a copy. Or if they do know, the cops won't be looking for any copies around this town, that's for sure."

Borislav's doubts overflowed into sarcasm. "You're saying it's a fabrikator that copies fabrikators? It's a fabbing fab fabber, that's what you're telling me, Fleka?"

A shrill wail of shock and alarm came from the front of the kiosk. Borislav hurried to see.

A teenage girl, in a cheap red coat and yellow winter boots, was sobbing into her cellphone. She was Jovanica, one of his best customers.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"Oh! It's you!" Jovanica snapped her phone shut and raised a skinny hand to her lips. "Are you still alive, Mr. Boots?"

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"Why wouldn't I be alive?"

"Well, what happened to you? Who robbed your store?"

"I'm not robbed. Everything has been sold, that's all."

Jovanica's young face screwed up in doubt, rage, frustration and grief. "Then *where are my hair toys*?"

"What?"

"Where are my favorite barrettes? My hair clips! My scrunchies and headbands and beautiful pins! There was a whole tree of them, right here! I picked new toys from that tree every day! I finally had it giving me just what I wanted!"

"Oh. That." Borislav had sold the whirling rack of hair toys, along with its entire freight of goods.

"Your rack sold the best hair toys in town! So super and cool! What happened to it? And what happened to your store? It's broken! There's nothing left!"

"That's true, 'Neetsa. You had a very special relationship with that interactive rack, but...well...." Borislav groped for excuses, and, with a leap of genius, he found one. "I'll tell you a secret. You're growing up now, that's what."

"I want my hair toys! Go get my rack right now!"

"Hair toys are for the nine-to-fifteen age bracket. You're growing out of that market niche. You should be thinking seriously about earrings."

Jovanica's hands flew to her earlobes. "You mean pierce my ears?"

Borislav nodded. "High time."

"Mama won't let me do that."

"I can speak to your mama. You're getting to be a big girl now. Soon you'll have to beat the boys away with a stick."

Jovanica stared at the cracks in the pavement. "No I won't."

"Yes you will," said Borislav, hefting his cane reflexively.

Fleka the Gypsy had been an interested observer. Now he spoke up. "Don't cry about your pretty things: because Boots here is the King of Kiosks. He can get you all the pretty things in the world!"

"Don't you listen to the gypsy," said Borislav. "Listen, Jovanica: your old hair-toy tree, I'm sorry, it's gone for good. You'll have to start over with a brand new one. It won't know anything about what you want."

"After all my shopping? That's terrible!"

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"Never you mind. I'll make you a different deal. Since you're getting to be such a big girl, you're adding a lot of value by making so many highly informed consumer choices. So, next time, there will be a new economy for you. I'll pay you to teach that toy tree just what you want to buy."

Fleka stared at him. "What did you just say? You want to *pay this kid for shopping*?"

"That's right."

"She's a little kid!"

"I'm not a little kid!" Jovanica took swift offense. "You're a dirty old gypsy!"

"Jovanica is the early hair-toy adopter, Fleka. She's the market leader here. Whatever hair toys Jovanica buys, all the other girls come and buy. So, yeah. I'm gonna cut her in on that action. I should have done that long ago."

Jovanica clapped her hands. "Can I have lots of extra hair toys, instead of just stupid money?"

"Absolutely. Of course. Those loyal-customer rewards will keep you coming back here, when you ought to be doing your homework."

Fleka marveled. "It's completely gone to your head, cashing out your whole stock at once. A man of your age, too."

The arts district never lacked for busybodies. Attracted by the little drama, four of them gathered round Borislav's kiosk. When they caught him glowering at them, they all pretended to need water from his fountain. At least his fountain was still working.

"Here comes my mama," said Jovanica. Her mother, Ivana, burst headlong from the battered doors of a nearby block of flats. Ivana wore a belted house robe, a flung-on muffler, a heavy scarf, and brightly knitted woolen house slippers. She brandished a laden pillowcase.

"Thank God they haven't hurt you!" said Ivana, her breath puffing in the chilly air. She opened her pillowcase. It held a steam iron, a hair dryer, an old gilt mirror, a nickeled hip-flask, a ragged fur stole, and a lidded, copper-bottomed saucepan.

"Mr. Boots is all right, Mama," said Jovanica. "They didn't steal anything. He *sold* everything!"

"You sold your kiosk?" said Ivana, and the hurt and shock deepened in her eyes. "You're leaving us?"

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"It was business," Borislav muttered. "Sorry for the inconvenience. It'll be a while before things settle down."

"Honestly, I don't need these things. If these things will help you in any way, you're very welcome to them."

"Mama wants you to sell these things," Jovanica offered, with a teen's oppressive helpfulness. "Then you can have the money to fix your store."

Borislav awkwardly patted the kiosk's fiberboard wall. "Ivana, this old place doesn't look like much, so empty and with this big hole...but, well, I had some luck."

"Ma'am, you must be cold in those house slippers," said Fleka the Gypsy. With an elegant swoop of his arm, he gestured at the gilt-and-glassed front counter of the Three Cats Café. "May I get you a hot cappuccino?"

"You're right, sir, it's cold here." Ivana tucked the neck of her pillowcase, awkwardly, over her arm. "I'm glad things worked out for you, Borislav."

"Yes, things are all right. Really."

Ivana aimed a scowl at the passersby, who watched her with a lasting interest. "We'll be going now, 'Neetsa."

"Mama, I'm not cold. The weather's clearing up!"

"We're going." They left.

Fleka picked at his discolored canine with his forefinger. "So, maestro. What just happened there?"

"She's a nice kid. She's hasty sometimes. The young are like that. That can't be helped." Borislav shrugged. "Let's talk our business inside."

He limped into his empty kiosk. Fleka wedged in behind him and managed to slam the door. Borislav could smell the man's rich, goulash-tinged breath.

"I was never inside one of these before," Fleka remarked, studying every naked seam for the possible point of a burglar's prybar. "I thought about getting a kiosk of my own, but, well, a man gets so restless."

"It's all about the product flow divided by the floor space. By that measure, a kiosk is super-efficient retailing. It's about as efficient as any sole proprietor can do. But it's a one-man enterprise. So, well, a man's just got to go it alone."

Fleka looked at him with wise, round eyes. "That girl who cried so much about her hair. That's not your girl, is she?"

"What? No."

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"What happened to the father, then? The flu got him?"

"She was born long after the flu, but, yeah, you're right, her father passed away." Borislav coughed. "He was a good friend of mine. A soldier. Really good-looking guy. His kid is gorgeous."

"So you didn't do anything about that. Because you're not a soldier, and you're not rich, and you're not gorgeous."

"Do anything about what?"

"A woman like that Ivana, she isn't asking for some handsome soldier or some rich-guy boss. A woman like her, she wants maybe a pretty dress. Maybe a dab of perfume. And something in her bed that's better than a hot-water bottle."

"Well, I've got a kiosk and a broken leg."

"All us men have a broken leg. She thought you had nothing. She ran right down here, with anything she could grab for you, stuffed into her pillowcase. So you're not an ugly man. You're a stupid man." Fleka thumped his chest. "I'm the ugly man. Me. I've got three wives: the one in Bucharest, the one in Lublin, and the wife in Linz isn't even a gypsy. They're gonna bury me standing, maestro. That can't be helped, because I'm a man. But that's not what you are. You're a fool."

"Thanks for the free fortune-telling. You know all about this, do you? She and I were here during the hard times. That's what. She and I have a history."

"You're a fanatic. You're a geek. I can see through you like the windows of this kiosk. You should get a life." Fleka thumped the kiosk's wallpaper, and sighed aloud. "Look, life is sad, all right? Life is sad even when you do get a life. So. Boots. Now I'm gonna tell you about this fabrikator of mine, because you got some spare money, and you're gonna buy it from me. It's a nice machine. Very sweet. It comes from a hospital. It's supposed to make bones. So the tutorial is all about making bones, and that's bad, because nobody buys bones. If you are deaf and you want some new little black bones in your ears, that's what this machine is for. Also, these black toys I made with it, I can't paint them. The toys are much too hard, so the paint breaks right off. Whatever you make with this fabrikator, it's hard and black, and you can't paint it, and it belongs by rights inside some sick person. Also, I can't read the stupid tutorials. I hate tutorials. I hate reading."

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"Does it run on standard voltage?"

"I got it running on DC off the fuel cell in my car."

"Where's the feedstock?"

"It comes in big bags. It's a powder, it's a yellow dust. The fab sticks it together somehow, with sparks or something, it turns the powder shiny black and it knits it up real fast. That part, I don't get."

"I'll be offering one price for your machine and all your feedstock."

"There's another thing. That time when I went to Vienna. I gave you my word on that deal. We shook hands on it. That deal was really important, they really needed it, they weren't kidding about it, and, well, I screwed up. Because of Vienna."

"That's right, Fleka. You screwed up bad."

"Well, that's my price. That's part of my price. I'm gonna sell you this toy-maker. We're gonna haul it right out of the car, put it in the kiosk here nice and safe. When I get the chance, I'm gonna bring your bag of coal-straw, too. But we forget about Vienna. We just forget about it."

Borislav said nothing.

"You're gonna forgive me my bad, screwed-up past. That's what I want from you."

"I'm thinking about it."

"That's part of the deal."

"We're going to forget the past, and you're going to give me the machine, the stock, and also fifty bucks."

"Okay, sold."

WITH THE FABRIKATOR inside his kiosk, Borislav had no room inside the kiosk for himself. He managed to transfer the tutorials out of the black, silent fab and into his laptop. The sun had come out. Though it was still damp and chilly, the boys from the Three Cats had unstacked their white café chairs. Borislav took a seat there. He ordered black coffee and began perusing awkward machine translations from the Polish manual.

Selma arrived to bother him. Selma was married to a schoolteacher, a nice guy with a steady job. Selma called herself an artist, made jewelry, and dressed like a lunatic. The schoolteacher thought the world of Selma,

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although she slept around on him and never cooked him a decent meal.

"Why is your kiosk so empty? What are you doing, just sitting out here?"

Borislav adjusted the angle of his screen. "I'm seizing the means of production."

"What did you do with all my bracelets and necklaces?"

"I sold them."

"All of them?"

"Every last scrap."

Selma sat down as it hit with a mallet. "Then you should buy me a glass of champagne!"

Borislav reluctantly pulled his phone and text-messaged the waiter.

It was getting blustery, but Selma preened over her glass of cheap Italian red. "Don't expect me to replace your stock soon! My artwork's in great demand."

"There's no hurry."

"I broke the luxury market, across the river at the Intercontinental! The hotel store will take all the bone-ivory chokers I can make."

"Mmm-hmm."

"Bone-ivory chokers, they're the perennial favorite of ugly, aging tourist women with wattled necks."

Borislav glanced up from his screen. "Shouldn't you be running along to your workbench?"

"Oh, sure, sure, 'give the people what they want,' that's your sick, petit-bourgeois philosophy! Those foreign tourist women in their big hotels, they want me to make legacy kitsch!"

Borislav waved one hand at the street. "Well, we do live in the old arts district."

"Listen, stupid, when this place was the *young* arts district, it was full of avant-gardists plotting revolution. Look at me for once. Am I from the museum?" Selma yanked her skirt to mid-thigh. "Do I wear little old peasant shoes that turn up at the toes?"

"What the hell has gotten into you? Did you sit on your tack-hammer?"

Selma narrowed her kohl-lined eyes. "What do you expect me to do, with my hands and my artisan skills, when you're making all kinds of

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adornments with fabrikators? I just saw that stupid thing inside your kiosk there."

Borislav sighed. "Look, I don't know. You tell me what it means, Selma."

"It means revolution. That's what. It means another revolution."

Borislav laughed at her.

Selma scowled and lifted her kid-gloved fingers. "Listen to me. Transition number one. When communism collapsed. The people took to the streets. Everything privatized. There were big market shocks."

"I remember those days. I was a kid, and you weren't even born then."

"Transition Two. When globalism collapsed. There was no oil. There was war and bankruptcy. There was sickness. That was when I was a kid."

Borislav said nothing about that. All things considered, his own first Transition had been a kinder time to grow up in.

"Then comes Transition Three." Selma drew a breath. "When this steadily increasing cybernetic intervention in manufacturing liberates a distinctly human creativity."

"Okay, what is that about?"

"I'm telling you what it's about. You're not listening. We're in the third great Transition. It's a revolution. Right now. Here. This isn't Communism, this isn't Globalism. This is the next thing after that. It's happening. No longer merely reacting to this influx of mindless goods, the modern artist uses human creative strength in the name of a revolutionary heterogeneity!"

Selma always talked pretentious, self-important drivel. Not quite like this, though. She'd found herself some new drivel.

"Where did you hear all that?"

"I heard it here in this café! You're just not listening, that's your problem. You never listen to anybody. Word gets around fast in the arts community."

"I live here too, you know. I'd listen to your nutty blither all day, if you ever meant business."

Selma emptied her wineglass. Then she reached inside her hand-loomed, artsy sweater. "If you laugh at this, I'm going to kill you."

Borislav took the necklace she offered him. "Where's this from? Who sent you this?"

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"That's mine! I made it. With my hands."

Borislav tugged the tangled chain through his fingers. He was no jeweler, but knew what decent jewelry looked like. This was indecent jewelry. If the weirdest efforts of search engines looked like products from Mars, then this necklace was straight from Venus. It was slivers of potmetal, blobs of silver, and chips of topaz. It was like jewelry straight out of a nightmare.

"Selma, this isn't your customary work."

"Machines can't dream. I saw this in my dreams."

"Oh. Right, of course."

"Well, it was my nightmare, really. But I woke up! Then I created my vision! I don't have to make that cheap, conventional crap, you know! I only make cheap junk because that's all you are willing to sell!"

"Well...." He had never spoken with frankness to Selma before, but the glittering light in her damp eyes made yesterday's habits seem a little slow-witted. "Well, I wouldn't know what to charge for a work of art like this."

"Somebody would want this, though? Right? Wouldn't they?" She was pleading with him. "Somebody? They would buy my new necklace, right? Even though it's...different."

"No. This isn't the sort of jewelry that the people buy. This is the sort of jewelry that the people stare at, and probably laugh at, too. But then, there would come one special person. She would really want this necklace. She would want this more than anything. She would have to have this thing at absolutely any price."

"I could make more like that," Selma told him, and she touched her heart. "Because now I know where it comes from."

III.

Borislav installed the fab inside the empty kiosk, perched on a stout wooden pedestal, where its workings could be seen by the people.

His first choices for production were, naturally, hair toys. Borislav borrowed some fancy clips from Jovanica, and copied their shapes inside his kiosk with his medical scanner.

Sure enough, the fabricator sprayed out shiny black replicas.

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Jovanica amused a small crowd by jumping up and down on them. The black clips themselves were well-nigh indestructible, but their cheap metal springs soon snapped.

Whenever a toy broke, however, it was a simple matter to cast it right back into the fabrikator's hopper. The fab chewed away at the black object, with an ozone-like reek, until the fabbed object became the yellow dust again.

Straw, right into gold.

Borislav sketched out a quick business plan on the back of a Three Cats beer coaster. With hours of his labor, multiplied by price-per-gram, he soon established his point of profit. He was in a new line of work.

With the new fabrikator, he could copy the shapes of any small object he could scan. Of course, he couldn't literally "copy" everything: a puppy dog, a nice silk dress, a cold bottle of beer, those were all totally out of the question. But he could copy most anything that was made from some single, rigid material: an empty bottle, a fork, a trash can, a kitchen knife.

The kitchen knives were an immediate hit. The knives were shiny and black, very threatening and scary, and it was clear they would never need sharpening. It was also delightful to see the fabrikator mindlessly spitting up razor-sharp knives. The kids were back in force to watch the action, and this time, even the grownups gathered and chattered.

To accommodate the eager crowd of gawkers, the Three Cats boys set out their chairs and tables, and even their striped, overhead canopy, as cheery as if it were summer.

The weather favored them. An impromptu block party broke out.

Mirko from the Three Cats gave him a free meal. "I'm doing very well by this," Mirko said. "You've got yourself a nine-days' wonder here. This sure reminds me of when Transition Two was ending. Remember when those city lights came back on? Brother, those were great days."

"Nine days won't last long. I need to get back inside that kiosk, like normal again."

"It's great to see you out and about, mixing it up with us, Boots. We never talk anymore." Mirko spread his hands in apology, then scrubbed the table. "I run this place now...it's the pressure of business...that's all my fault."

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Borislav accepted a payment from a kid who'd made himself a rock-solid black model dinosaur. "Mirko, do you have room for a big vending machine, here by your café? I need to get that black beast out of my kiosk. The people need their sticks of gum."

"You really want to build some vendorizing thing out here? Like a bank machine?"

"I guess I do, yeah. It pays."

"Boots, I love this crowd you're bringing me, but why don't you just put your machine wherever they put bank machines? There are hundreds of bank machines." Mirko took his empty plate. "There are millions of bank machines. Those machines took over the world."

IV.

DAYS PASSED. The people wouldn't let him get back to normal. It became a public sport to see what people would bring in for the fabrikator to copy. It was common to make weird things as gag gifts: a black, rock-solid spray of roses, for instance. You could hand that black bouquet to your girlfriend for a giggle, and if she got huffy, then you could just bring it back, have it weighed, and get a return-deposit for the yellow dust.

The ongoing street drama was a tonic for the neighborhood. In no time flat, every café lounger and class-skipping college student was a self-appointed expert about fabs, fabbing, and revolutionary super-fabs that could fab their own fabbing. People brought their relatives to see. Tourists wandered in and took pictures. Naturally they all seemed to want a word with the owner and proprietor.

The people being the people, the holiday air was mixed with unease. Things took a strange turn when a young bride arrived with her wedding china. She paid to copy each piece, then loudly and publicly smashed the originals in the street. A cop showed up to dissuade her. Then the cop wanted a word, too.

Borislav was sitting with Professor Damov, an academician and pious blowhard who ran the local ethnographic museum. The professor's city-sponsored hall specialized in what Damov called "material culture," meaning dusty vitrines full of battle flags, holy medallions, distaffs,

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fishing nets, spinning wheels, gramophones, and such. Given these new circumstances, the professor had a lot on his mind.

"Officer," said Damov, briskly waving his wineglass, "it may well surprise you to learn this, but the word 'kiosk' is an ancient Ottoman term. In the original Ottoman kiosk, nothing was bought or sold. The kiosk was a regal gift from a prince to the people. A kiosk was a place to breathe the evening air, to meditate, to savor life and living; it was an elegant garden pergola."

"They didn't break their wedding china in the gutter, though," said the cop.

"Oh, no, on the contrary, if a bride misbehaved in those days, she'd be sewn into a leather sack and thrown into the Bosphorus!"

The cop was mollified, and he moved right along, but soon a plain-clothes cop showed up and took a prominent seat inside the Three Cats Café. This changed the tone of things. The police surveillance proved that something real was happening. It was a kind of salute.

Dusk fell. A group of garage mechanics came by, still in their grimy overalls, and commenced a deadly serious professional discussion about fabbing trolley parts. A famous stage actor showed up with his entourage, to sign autographs and order drinks for all his "friends."

Some alarmingly clean-cut university students appeared. They weren't there to binge on beer. They took a table, ordered Mirko's cheapest pizza, and started talking in points-of-order.

Next day, the actor brought the whole cast of his play, and the student radicals were back in force. They took more tables, with much more pizza. Now they had a secretary, and a treasurer. Their ringleaders had shiny black political buttons on their coats.

A country bus arrived and disgorged a group of farmers. These peasants made identical copies of something they were desperate to have, yet anxious to hide from all observers.

Ace came by the bustling café. Ace was annoyed to find that he had to wait his turn for any private word with Borislav.

"Calm down, Ace. Have a slice of this pork pizza. The boss here's an old friend of mine, and he's in a generous mood."

"Well, my boss is unhappy," Ace retorted. "There's money being made here, and he wasn't told about it."

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"Tell your big guy to relax. I'm not making any more money than I usually do at the kiosk. That should be obvious: consider my rate of production. That machine can only make a few copies an hour."

"Have you finally gone stupid? Look at this crowd!" Ace pulled his shades off and studied the densely clustered café. Despite the lingering chill, a gypsy band was setting up, with accordions and trombones. "Okay, this proves it: see that wiseguy sitting there with that undercover lieutenant? He's one of *them*!"

Borislav cast a sidelong glance at the rival gangster. The North River Boy looked basically identical to Ace: the same woolly hat, cheap black sunglasses, jacket, and bad attitude, except for his sneakers, which were red instead of blue. "The River Boys are moving in over here?"

"They always wanted this turf. This is the lively part of town."

That River Boy had some nerve. Gangsters had been shot in the Three Cats Café. And not just a few times, either. It was a major local tradition.

"I'm itching to whack that guy," Ace lied, sweating, "but, well, he's sitting over there with that cop! And a pet politician, too!"

Borislav wondered if his eyes were failing. In older days, he would never have missed those details.

There was a whole little tribe of politicians filtering into the café, and sitting near the mobster's table. The local politicians always traveled in parties. Small, fractious parties.

One of these local politicals was the arts districts' own national representative. Mr. Savic was a member of the Radical Liberal Democratic Party, a splinter clique of well-meaning, overeducated cranks.

"I'm gonna tell you a good joke, Ace. 'You can get three basic qualities with any politician: Smart, Honest, and Effective. But you only get to pick two.'"

Ace blinked. He didn't get it.

Borislav levered himself from his café chair and limped over to provoke a gladhanding from Mr. Savic. The young lawyer was smart and honest, and therefore ineffective. However, Savic, being so smart, was quick to recognize political developments within his own district. He had already appropriated the shiny black button of the young student radicals.

With an ostentatious swoop of his camel's-hair coattails, Mr. Savic

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deigned to sit at Borislav's table. He gave Ace a chilly glare. "Is it necessary that we consort with this organized-crime figure?"

"You tried to get me fired from my job in the embassy," Ace accused him.

"Yes, I did. It's bad enough that the criminal underworld infests our ruling party. We can't have the Europeans paying you off, too."

"That's you all over, Savic: always sucking up to rich foreigners and selling out the guy on the street!"

"Don't flatter yourself, you jumped-up little crook! You're not 'the street.' The people are the street!"

"Okay, so you got the people to elect you. You took office and you got a pretty haircut. Now you're gonna wrap yourself up in our flag, too? You're gonna steal the last thing the people have left!"

Borislav cleared his throat. "I'm glad we have this chance for a frank talk here. The way I figure it, managing this fabbing business is going to take some smarts and finesse."

The two of them stared at him. "You brought us here?" Ace said. "For our 'smarts and finesse?'"

"Of course I did. You two aren't here by accident, and neither am I. If we're not pulling the strings around here, then who is?"

The politician looked at the gangster. "There's something to what he says, you know. After all, this is Transition Three."

"So," said Borislav, "knock it off with that tough talk and do some fresh thinking for once! You sound like your own grandfathers!"

Borislav had surprised himself with this outburst. Savic, to his credit, looked embarrassed, while Ace scratched uneasily under his woolly hat. "Well, listen, Boots," said Ace at last, "even if you, and me, and your posh lawyer pal have us three nice Transition beers together, that's a River Boy sitting over there. What are we supposed to do about that?"

"I am entirely aware of the criminal North River Syndicate," Mr. Savic told him airily. "My investigative committee has been analyzing their gang."

"Oh, so you're analyzing, are you? They must be scared to death."

"There are racketeering laws on the books in this country," said Savic, glowering at Ace. "When we take power and finally have our purge of the criminal elements in this society, we won't stop at arresting that

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one little punk in his cheap red shoes. We will liquidate his entire parasite class: I mean him, his nightclub-singer girlfriend, his father, his boss, his brothers, his cousins, his entire football club.... As long as there is one honest judge in this country, and there are some honest judges, there are *always* some.... We will never rest! Never!"

"I've heard about your honest judges," Ace sneered. "You can spot 'em by the smoke columns when their cars blow up."

"Ace, stop talking through your hat. Let me make it crystal clear what's at stake here." Borislav reached under the table and brought up a clear plastic shopping bag. He dropped it on the table with a thud.

Ace took immediate interest. "You output a skull?"

"Ace, this is *my own* skull." The kiosk scanned him every day. So Borislav had his skull on file.

Ace juggled Borislav's skull free of the clear plastic bag, then passed it right over to the politician. "That fab is just superb! Look at the crisp detailing on those sutures!"

"I concur. A remarkable technical achievement." Mr. Savic turned the skull upside down, and frowned. "What happened to your teeth?"

"Those are normal."

"You call these wisdom teeth normal?"

"Hey, let me see those," Ace pleaded. Mr. Savic rolled Borislav's jet-black skull across the tabletop. Then he cast an over-shoulder look at his fellow politicians, annoyed that they enjoyed themselves so much without him.

"Listen to me, Mr. Savic. When you campaigned, I put your poster up in my kiosk. I even voted for you, and — "

Ace glanced up from the skull's hollow eye-sockets. "You vote, Boots?"

"Yes. I'm an old guy. Us old guys vote."

Savic faked some polite attention.

"Mr. Savic, you're our political leader. You're a Radical Liberal Democrat. Well, we've got ourselves a pretty radical, liberal situation here. What are we supposed to do now?"

"It's very good that you asked me that," nodded Savic. "You must be aware that there are considerable intellectual-property difficulties with your machine."

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"What are those?"

"I mean patents and copyrights. Reverse-engineering laws. Trademarks. We don't observe all of those laws in this country of ours...in point of fact, practically speaking, we scarcely observe any.... But the rest of the world fully depends on those regulatory structures. So if you go around publicly pirating wedding china — let's just say — well, the makers of wedding china will surely get wind of that some day. I'd be guessing that you see a civil lawsuit. Cease-and-desist, all of that."

"I see."

"That's just how the world works. If you damage their income, they'll simply have to sue you. Follow the money, follow the lawsuits. A simple principle, really. Although you've got a very nice little sideshow here.... It's really brightened up the neighborhood...."

Professor Damov arrived at the café. He had brought his wife, Mrs. Professor-Doctor Damova, an icy sociologist with annoying Marxist and feminist tendencies. The lady professor wore a fur coat as solid as a bank vault, and a bristling fur hat.

Damov pointed out a black plaque on Borislav's tabletop. "I'm sorry, gentleman, but this table is reserved for us."

"Oh," Borislav blurted. He hadn't noticed the fabbed reservation, since it was so black.

"We're having a little party tonight," said Damov, "it's our anniversary."

"Congratulations, sir and madame!" said Mr. Savic. "Why not sit here with us just a moment until your guests arrive?"

A bottle of Mirko's prosecco restored general good feeling. "I'm an arts-district lawyer, after all," said Savic, suavely topping up everyone's glasses. "So, Borislav, if I were you, I would call this fabrikator an arts installation!"

"Really? Why?"

"Because when those humorless foreigners with their lawsuits try to make a scandal of the arts scene, that never works!" Savic winked at the professor and his wife. "We really enjoyed it, eh? We enjoyed a good show while we had it!"

Ace whipped off his sunglasses. "It's an 'arts installation!' Wow! That is some smart lawyer thinking there!"

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Borislav frowned. "Why do you say that?"

Ace leaned in to whisper behind his hand. "Well, because that's what we tell the River Boys! We tell them it's just an art show, then we shut it down. They stay in their old industrial district, and we keep our turf in the old arts district. Everything is cool!"

"That's your big solution?"

"Well, yeah," said Ace, leaning back with a grin. "Hooray for art!"

Borislav's temper rose from a deep well to burn the back of his neck. "That's it, huh? That's what you two sorry sons of bitches have to offer the people? You just want to get rid of the thing! You want to put it out, like spitting on a candle! Nothing *happens* with your stupid approach! You call that a Transition? Everything's just the same as it was before! Nothing changes at all!"

Damov shook his head. "History is always passing. We changed. We're all a year older."

Mrs. Damov spoke up. "I can't believe your fascist, technocratic nonsense! Do you really imagine that you will improve the lives of the people by dropping some weird machine onto their street at random? With no mature consideration of any deeper social issues? I wanted to pick up some milk tonight! Who's manning your kiosk, you goldbricker? Your store is completely empty! Are we supposed to queue?"

Mr. Savic emptied his glass. "Your fabrikator is great fun, but piracy is illegal and immoral. Fair is fair, let's face it."

"Fine," said Borislav, waving his arms, "if that's what you believe, then go tell the people. Tell the people in this café, right now, that you want to throw the future away! Go on, do it! Say you're scared of crime! Say they're not mature enough and they have to think it through. Tell the people that they have to vote for that!"

"Let's not be hasty," said Savic.

"Your sordid mechanical invention is useless without a social invention," said Mrs. Damova primly.

"My wife is exactly correct!" Damov beamed. "Because a social invention is much more than gears and circuits, it's...well, it's something like that kiosk. A kiosk was once a way to drink tea in a royal garden. Now it's a way to buy milk! That is social invention!" He clicked her bubbling glass with his own.

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Ace mulled this over. "I never thought of it that way. Where can we steal a social invention? How do you copy one of those?"

These were exciting questions. Borislav felt a piercing ray of mental daylight. "That European woman, what's-her-face. She bought out my kiosk. Who is she? Who does she work for?"

"You mean Dr. Grootjans? She is, uh...she's the economic affairs liaison for a European Parliamentary investigative committee."

"Right," said Borislav at once, "that's it. Me, too! I want that. Copy me that! I'm the liaison for the investigation Parliament something stupid-or-other."

Savic laughed in delight. "This is getting good."

"You. Mr. Savic. You have a Parliament investigation committee."

"Well, yes, I certainly do."

"Then you should investigate this fabrikator. You place it under formal government investigation. You investigate it, all day and all night. Right here on the street, in public. You issue public reports. And of course you make stuff. You make all kinds of stuff. Stuff to investigate."

"Do I have your proposal clear? You are offering your fabrikator to the government?"

"Sure. Why not? That's better than losing it. I can't sell it to you. I've got no papers for it. So sure, you can look after it. That's my gift to the people."

Savic stroked his chin. "This could become quite an international issue." Suddenly, Savic had the look of a hungry man about to sit at a bonfire and cook up a whole lot of sausages.

"Man, that's even better than making it a stupid art project," Ace enthused. "A stupid government project! Hey, those last forever!"

V.

Savic's new investigation committee was an immediate success. With the political judo typical of the region, the honest politician wangled a large and generous support grant from the Europeans — basically, in order to investigate himself.

The fab now reformed its efforts: from consumer knickknacks to the pressing needs of the state's public sector. Jet-black fire plugs appeared in

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the arts district. Jet-black hoods for the broken street lights, and jet-black manhole covers for the streets. Governments bought in bulk, so a primary source for the yellow dust was located. The fab churned busily away right in the public square, next to a railroad tanker full of feed-stock.

Borislav returned to his kiosk. He made a play at resuming his normal business. He was frequently called to testify in front of Savic's busy committee. This resulted in Fleka the Gypsy being briefly arrested, but the man skipped bail. No one made any particular effort to find Fleka. They certainly had never made much effort before.

Investigation soon showed that the fabrikator was stolen property from a hospital in Gdansk. Europeans had long known how to make such fabrikators: fabrikators that used carbon nanotubes. They had simply refrained from doing so.

As a matter of wise precaution, the Europeans had decided not to create devices that could so radically disrupt a well-established political and economic order. The pain of such an act was certain to be great. The benefits were doubtful.

On some grand, abstract level of poetic engineering, it obviously made sense to create super-efficient, widely distributed, cottage-scale factories that could create as much as possible with as little as possible. If one were inventing industrial civilization from the ground up, then fabbing was a grand idea. But an argument of that kind made no sense to the installed base and the established interests. You couldn't argue a voter out of his job. So fabs had been subtly restricted to waxes, plastics, plaster, papier-mâché, and certain metals.

Except, that is, for fabs with medical applications. Medicine, which dealt in agonies of life and death, was never merely a marketplace. There was always somebody whose child had smashed and shattered bones. Sooner or later this violently interested party, researching a cure for his beloved, would find the logjam and scream: *won't one of you heartless, inhuman bastards think of the children*?

Of course, those who had relinquished this technology had the children's best interests at heart. They wanted their children to grow up safe within stable, regulated societies. But one could never explain good things for vaporous, potential future children to someone whose heart and soul was twisted by the suffering of an actual, real-life child.

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So a better and different kind of fab had come into being. It was watched over with care...but, as time and circumstance passed, it slipped loose.

Eager to spread the fabbing pork through his constituency, Savic commissioned renowned local artists to design a new breed of kiosk. This futuristic Transition Three ultra-kiosk would house the very fab that could make it. Working with surprising eagerness and speed (given that they were on government salary), these artisan-designers created a new, official, state-supported fabbing kiosk, an alarmingly splendid, well-nigh monumental kiosk, half Ottoman pavilion, half Stalinist gingerbread, and almost one hundred percent black carbon nanotubes, except for a few necessary steel bolts, copper wires, and brass staples.

Borislav knew better than to complain about this. He had to abandon his perfectly decent, old-fashioned, customary kiosk, which was swiftly junked and ripped into tiny recyclable shreds. Then he climbed, with pain and resignation, up the shiny black stairsteps into this eerie, oversized, grandiose rock-solid black fort, this black-paneled royal closet whose ornate, computer-calligraphic roof would make meteors bounce off it like graupel hail.

The cheap glass windows fit badly. The new black shelves confused his fingers. The slick black floor sent his chair skidding wildly. The black carbon walls would not take paint, glue or paper. He felt like an utter fool — but this kiosk hadn't been built for his convenience. This was a kiosk for the new Transition Three generation, crazily radical, liberal guys for whom a "kiosk" was no mere humble conduit, but the fortress of a new culture war.

A kiosk like this new one could be flung from a passing jet. It could hammer the ground like a plummeting thunderbolt and bounce up completely unharmed. With its ever-brimming bags of gold dust, a cybernetic tumbling of possessions would boil right out of it: *bottles bags knobs latches wheels pumps*, molds for making other things, tools for making other things; *saws, hammers wrenches levers*, drillbits, screws, screwdrivers, *awls pliers scissors punches*, planes, files, rasps, jacks, carts and shears; pulleys, chains and chain hoists, trolleys, cranes, buckets, bottles, barrels.... All of these items sitting within their digital files as neat as chess pieces, sitting there like the very *idea* of chess pieces, like a mental chess set awaiting human desire to leap into being and action.

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As Borislav limped, each night, from his black battleship super-kiosk back to his mother's apartment, he could see Transition Three insinuating itself into the fabric of his city.

Transition One had once a look all its own: old socialist buildings of bad brick and substandard plaster, peeling like a secret leprosy, then exploding with the plastic branding symbols of the triumphant West: candy bars, franchised fried food, provocative lingerie.

Transition Two was a tougher business: he remembered it mostly for its lacks and privations. Empty stores, empty roads, crowds of bicycles, the angry hum of newfangled fuel cells, the cheap glitter of solar roofing, insulation stuffed everywhere like the paper in a pauper's shoes. Crunchy, mulchy-looking new construction. Grass on the rooftops, grass in the trolley-ways. Networking masts and dishes. Those clean, cold, flat-panel lights.

This third Transition had its own native look, too. It was the same song and another verse. It was black. It was jet-black, smooth, anonymous, shiny, stainless, with an occasional rainbow shimmer off the layers and grooves whenever the light was just right, like the ghosts of long-vanished oil slicks.

Revolution was coming. The people wanted more of this game than the regime was allowing them to have. There were five of the fabs running in the city now. Because of growing foreign pressure against "the dangerous proliferation," the local government wouldn't make any more fabrikators. So the people were being denied the full scope of their desire to live differently. The people were already feeling different inside, so they were going to take it to the streets. The politicians were feebly trying to split differences between ways of life that just could not be split.

Did the laws of commerce exist for the people's sake? Or did the people exist as slaves of the so-called laws of commerce? That was populist demagoguery, but that kind of talk was popular for a reason.

Borislav knew that civilization existed through its laws. Humanity suffered and starved whenever outside the law. But those stark facts didn't weigh on the souls of the locals for ten seconds. The local people here were not that kind of people. They had never been that kind of people. Turmoil: that was what the people here had to offer the rest of the world.

The people had flown off the handle for far less than this; for a shot

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fired at some passing prince, for instance. Little street demonstrations were boiling up from left and right. Those demonstrations waxed and waned, but soon the applecart would tip hard. The people would take to the city squares, banging their jet-black kitchen pans, shaking their jet-black house keys. Borislav knew from experience that this voice from the people was a nation-shaking racket. The voice of reason from the fragile government sounded like a cartoon mouse.

Borislav looked after certain matters, for there would be no time to look after them, later. He talked to a lawyer and made a new will. He made backups of his data and copies of important documents, and stashed things away in numerous caches. He hoarded canned goods, candles, medicines, tools, even boots. He kept his travel bag packed.

He bought his mother her long-promised cemetery plot. He acquired a handsome headstone for her, too. He even found silk sheets.

VI.

IT DIDN'T BREAK in the way he had expected, but then local history could be defined as events that no rational man would expect. It came as a kiosk. It was a brand new European kiosk. A civilized, ultimate, decent, well-considered, preemptive intervention kiosk. The alien pink-and-white kiosk was beautiful and perfect and clean, and there was no one remotely human inside it.

The automatic kiosk had a kind of silver claw that unerringly picked its goods from its antiseptic shelves, and delivered them to the amazed and trembling customer. These were brilliant goods, they were shiny and gorgeous and tagged with serial numbers and radio-tracking stickers. They glowed all over with reassuring legality: health regulations, total lists of contents, cross-border shipping, tax stamps, associated websites, places to register a complaint.

The superpower kiosk was a thing of interlocking directorates, of 100,000-page regulatory codes and vast, clotted databases, a thing of true brilliance, neurosis and fine etiquette, like a glittering Hapsburg court. And it had been dropped with deliberate accuracy on his own part of Europe — that frail and volatile part — the part about to blow up.

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The European kiosk was an almighty vending machine. It replaced its rapidly dwindling stocks in the Black Maria middle of the night, with unmanned cargo vehicles, flat blind anonymous cockroach-like robot things of pink plastic and pink rubber wheels, that snuffled and radared their way across the midnight city and obeyed every traffic law with a crazy punctiliousness.

There was no one to talk to inside the pink European kiosk, although, when addressed through its dozens of microphones, the kiosk could talk the local language, rather beautifully. There were no human relations to be found there. There was no such thing as society: only a crisp interaction.

Gangs of kids graffiti-tagged the pink invader right away. Someone — Ace most likely — made a serious effort to burn it down.

They found Ace dead two days later, in his fancy electric sports car, with three fabbed black bullets through him, and a fabbed black pistol abandoned on the car's hood.

VII.

Ivana caught him before he could leave for the hills.

"You would go without a word, wouldn't you? Not one word to me, and again you just go!"

"It's the time to go."

"You'd take crazy students with you. You'd take football bullies. You'd take tough-guy gangsters. You'd take gypsies and crooks. You'd go there with anybody. And not take me?"

"We're not on a picnic. And you're not the kind of scum who goes to the hills when there's trouble."

"You're taking guns?"

"You women never understand! You don't take carbines with you when you've got a black factory that can make carbines!" Borislav rubbed his unshaven jaw. Ammo, yes, some ammo might well be needed. Grenades, mortar rounds. He knew all too well how much of that stuff had been buried out in the hills, since the last time. It was like hunting for truffles.

And the land mines. Those were what really terrified him, in an

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unappeasable fear he would take to his grave. Coming back toward the border, once, he and his fellow vigilantes, laden with their loot, marching in step in the deep snow, each man tramping in another's sunken boot-prints.... Then a flat, lethal thing, with a chip, a wad of explosive and a bellyful of steel bolts, counted their passing footsteps. The virgin snow went blood-red.

Borislav might have easily built such a thing himself. The shade-tree plans for such guerrilla devices were everywhere on the net. He had never built such a bomb, though the prospect gnawed him in nightmares.

Crippled for life, back then, he had raved with high fever, freezing, starving, in a hidden village in the hills. His last confidante was his nurse. Not a wife, not a lover, not anyone from any army, or any gang, or any government. His mother. His mother had the only tie to him so profound that she would leave her city, leave everything, and risk starvation to look after a wounded guerrilla. She brought him soup. He watched her cheeks sink in day by day as she starved herself to feed him.

"You don't have anyone to cook for you out there," Ivana begged.

"You'd be leaving your daughter."

"You're leaving your mother."

She had always been able to sting him that way. Once again, despite everything he knew, he surrendered. "All right, then," he told her. "Fine. Be that way, since you want it so much. If you want to risk everything, then you can be our courier. You go to the camp, and you go to the city. You carry some things for us. You never ask any questions about the things."

"I never ask questions," she lied. They went to the camp and she just stayed with him. She never left his side, not for a day or a night. Real life started all over for them, once again. Real life was a terrible business.

VIII.

It no longer snowed much in the old ski villages; the weather was a real mess nowadays, and it was the summers you had to look out for. They set up their outlaw fab plant inside an abandoned set of horse stables.

The zealots talked wildly about copying an "infinite number of fabs," but that was all talk. That wasn't needed. It was only necessary to make

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and distribute enough fabs to shatter the nerves of the authorities. That was propaganda of the deed.

Certain members of the government were already nodding and winking at their efforts. That was the only reason that they might win. Those hustlers knew that if the weathervanes spun fast enough, the Byzantine cliques that ruled the statehouse would have to break up. There would be chaos. Serious chaos. But then, after some interval, the dust would have to settle on a new arrangement of power-players. Yesterday's staunch conservative, if he survived, would become the solid backer of the new regime. That was how it worked in these parts.

In the meantime, however, some dedicated group of damned fools would have to actually carry out the campaign on the ground. Out of any ten people willing to do this, seven were idiots. These seven were dreamers, rebels by nature, unfit to run so much as a lemonade stand.

One out of the ten would be capable and serious. Another would be genuinely dangerous: a true, amoral fanatic. The last would be the traitor to the group: the police agent, the coward, the informant.

There were thirty people actively involved in the conspiracy, which naturally meant twenty-one idiots. Knowing what he did, Borislav had gone there to prevent the idiots from quarreling over nothing and blowing the effort apart before it could even start. The three capable men had to be kept focussed on building the fabs. The fanatics were best used to sway and intimidate the potential informants.

If they held the rebellion together long enough, they would wear down all the sane people. That was the victory.

The rest was all details, where the devil lived. The idea of self-copying fabs looked great on a sheet of graph paper, but it made little practical sense to make fabs entirely with fabs. Worse yet, there were two vital parts of the fab that simply couldn't be fabbed at all. One was the nozzle that integrated the yellow dust into the black stuff. The other was the big recycler comb that chewed up the black stuff back into the yellow dust. These two crucial components obviously couldn't be made of the yellow dust or the black stuff.

Instead, they were made of precisely machined high-voltage European metals that were now being guarded like jewels. These components were way beyond the conspiracy's ability to create.

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Two dozen of the fabbing nozzles showed up anyway. They came through the courtesy of some foreign intelligence service. Rumor said the Japanese, for whatever inscrutable reason.

They still had no recycling combs. That was bad. It confounded and betrayed the whole dream of fabs to make them with the nozzles but not the recycling combs. This meant that their outlaw fabs could make things, but never recycle them. A world with fabs like that would be a nightmare: it would slowly but surely fill up with horrible, polluting fabjunk: unusable, indestructible, rock-solid lumps of black slag. Clearly this dark prospect had much affected the counsels of the original inventors.

There were also many dark claims that carbon nanotubes had dire health effects: because they were indestructible fibers, something like asbestos. And that was true: carbon nanotubes did cause cancer. However, they caused rather less cancer than several thousand other substances already in daily use.

It took all summer for the competent men to bang together the first outlaw fabs. Then it became necessary to sacrifice the idiots, in order to distribute the hardware. The idiots, shrill and eager as ever, were told to drive the fabs as far as possible from the original factory, then hand them over to sympathizers and scram.

Four of the five idiots were arrested almost at once. Then the camp was raided by helicopters.

However, Borislav had fully expected this response. He had moved the camp. In the city, riots were under way. It didn't matter who "won" these riots, because rioting melted the status quo. The police were hitting the students with indestructible black batons. The kids were slashing their paddywagon tires with indestructible black kitchen knives.

At this point, one of the fanatics had a major brainwave. He demanded that they send out dozens of fake black boxes that merely *looked* like fabs. There was no political need for their futuristic promises of plenty to actually work.

This cynical scheme was much less work than creating real fabs, so it was swiftly adopted. More than that: it was picked up, everywhere, by copycats. People were watching the struggle: in Bucharest, Lublin, Tbilisi; in Bratislava, Warsaw, and Prague. People were dipping ordinary objects

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in black lacquer to make them look fabbed. People were distributing handbooks for fabs, and files for making fabs. For every active crank who really wanted to make a fab, there were a hundred people who wanted to know how to do it. Just in case.

Some active cranks were succeeding. Those who failed became martyrs. As resistance spread like spilled ink, there were simply too many people implicated to classify it as criminal activity.

Once the military contractors realized there were very good reasons to make giant fabs the size of shipyards, the game was basically over. Transition Three was the new realpolitik. The new economy was the stuff of the everyday. The older order was over. It was something no one managed to remember, or even wanted to manage to remember.

The rest of it was quiet moves toward checkmate. And then the game just stopped. Someone tipped over the White King, in such a sweet, subtle, velvety way that one would have scarcely guessed that there had ever been a White King to fight against at all.

IX.

BORISLAV WENT to prison. It was necessary that somebody should go. The idiots were only the idiots. The competent guys had quickly found good positions in the new regime. The fanatics had despaired of the new dispensation, and run off to nurse their bitter disillusionment.

As a working rebel whose primary job had been public figurehead, Borislav was the reasonable party for public punishment.

Borislav turned himself in to a sympathetic set of cops who would look much better for catching him. They arrested him in a blaze of publicity. He was charged with "conspiracy": a rather merciful charge, given the host of genuine crimes committed by his group. Those were the necessary, everyday crimes of any revolution movement, crimes such as racketeering, theft of services, cross-border smuggling, subversion and sedition, product piracy, copyright infringement, money laundering, fake identities, squatting inside stolen property, illegal possession of firearms, and so forth.

Borislav and his various allies weren't charged with those many

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crimes. On the contrary; since he himself had been so loudly and publicly apprehended, those crimes of the others were quietly overlooked.

While sitting inside his prison cell, which was not entirely unlike a kiosk, Borislav discovered the true meaning of the old term "penitentiary." The original intention of prisons was that people inside them should be penitent people. Penitent people were supposed to meditate and contemplate their way out of their own moral failings. That was the original idea.

Of course, any real, modern "penitentiary" consisted mostly of frantic business dealings. Nobody "owned" much of anything inside the prison, other than a steel bunk and a chance at a shower, so simple goods such as talcum powder loomed very large in the local imagination. Borislav, who fully understood street-trading, naturally did very well at this. At least, he did much better than the vengeful, mentally limited people who were doomed to inhabit most jails.

Borislav thought a lot about the people in the jails. They, too, were the people, and many of those people were getting into jail because of him. In any Transition, people lost their jobs. They were broke, they lacked prospects. So they did something desperate.

Borislav did not much regret the turmoil he had caused the world, but he often thought about what it meant and how it must feel. Somewhere, inside some prison, was some rather nice young guy, with a wife and kids, whose job was gone because the fabs took it away. This guy had a shaven head, an ugly orange jumpsuit, and appalling food, just like Borislav himself. But that young guy was in the jail with less good reason. And with much less hope. And with much more regret.

That guy was suffering. Nobody gave a damn about him. If there was any justice, someone should mindfully suffer, and be penitent, because of the harsh wrong done that guy.

Borislav's mother came to visit him in the jail. She brought printouts from many self-appointed sympathizers. The world seemed to be full of strange foreign people who had nothing better to do with their time than to e-mail tender, supportive screeds to political prisoners. Ivana, something of a mixed comfort to him in their days of real life, did not visit the jail or see him. Ivana knew how to cut her losses when her men deliberately left her to do something stupid, such as volunteering for a prison.

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These strangers and foreigners expressed odd, truncated, malformed ideas of what he had been doing. Because they were the Voice of History.

He himself had no such voice to give to history. He came from a small place under unique circumstances. People who hadn't lived there would never understand it. Those who had lived there were too close to understand it. There was just no understanding for it. There were just...the events. Events, transitions, new things. Things like the black kiosks.

These new kiosks.... No matter where they were scattered in the world, they all had the sinister, strange, overly dignified look of his own original black kiosk. Because the people had seen those kiosks. The people knew well what a black fabbing kiosk was supposed to look like. Those frills, those fringes, that peaked top, that was just how you knew one. That was their proper look. You went there to make your kid's baby shoes indestructible. The kiosks did what they did, and they were what they were. They were everywhere, and that was that.

After twenty-two months, a decent interval, the new regime pardoned him as part of a general amnesty. He was told to keep his nose clean and his mouth shut. Borislav did this. He didn't have much to say, anyway.

X.

TIME PASSED. Borislav went back to the older kind of kiosk. Unlike the fancy new black fabbing kiosk, these older ones sold things that couldn't be fabbed: foodstuffs, mostly.

Now that fabs were everywhere and in public, fabbing technology was advancing by leaps and bounds. Surfaces were roughened so they shone with pastel colors. Technicians learned how to make the fibers fluffier, for bendable, flexible parts. The world was in a Transition, but no transition ended the world. A revolution just turned a layer in the compost heap of history, compressing that which now lay buried, bringing air and light to something hidden.

On a whim, Borislav went into surgery and had his shinbone fabbed. His new right shinbone was the identical, mirror-reversed copy of his left shinbone. After a boring recuperation, for he was an older man now and

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the flesh didn't heal as it once had, he found himself able to walk on an even keel for the first time in twenty-five years.

Now he could walk. So he walked a great deal. He didn't skip and jump for joy, but he rather enjoyed walking properly. He strolled the boulevards, he saw some sights, he wore much nicer shoes.

Then his right knee gave out, mostly from all that walking on an indestructible artificial bone. So he had to go back to the cane once again. No cure was a miracle panacea: but thanks to technology, the trouble had crept closer to his heart.

That made a difference. The shattered leg had oppressed him during most of his lifetime. That wound had squeezed his soul into its own shape. The bad knee would never have a chance to do that, because he simply wouldn't live that long. So the leg was a tragedy. The knee was an episode.

It was no great effort to walk the modest distance from his apartment block to his mother's grave. The city kept threatening to demolish his old apartments. They were ugly and increasingly old-fashioned, and they frankly needed to go. But the government's threats of improvement were generally empty, and the rents would see him through. He was a landlord. That was never a popular job, but someone was always going to take it. It might as well be someone who understood the plumbing.

It gave him great satisfaction that his mother had the last true granite headstone in the local graveyard. All the rest of them were fabbed.

Dr. Grootjans was no longer working in a government. Dr. Grootjans was remarkably well-preserved. If anything, this female functionary from an alien system looked *younger* than she had looked, years before. She had two prim Nordic braids. She wore a dainty little off-pink sweater. She had high heels.

Dr. Grootjans was writing about her experiences in the transition. This was her personal, confessional text, on the net of course, accompanied by photographs, sound recordings, links to other sites, and much supportive reader commentary.

"Her gravestone has a handsome Cyrillic font," said Dr. Grootjans.

Borislav touched a handkerchief to his lips. "Tradition does not mean that the living are dead. Tradition means that the dead are living."

Dr. Grootjans happily wrote this down. This customary action of hers had irritated him at first. However, her strange habits were growing on

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him. Would it kill him that this overeducated foreign woman subjected him to her academic study? Nobody else was bothering. To the neighborhood, to the people, he was a crippled, short-tempered old landlord. To her, the scholar-bureaucrat, he was a mysterious figure of international significance. Her version of events was hopelessly distorted and self-serving. But it was a version of events.

"Tell me about this grave," she said. "What are we doing here?"

"You wanted to see what I do these days. Well, this is what I do." Borislav set a pretty funeral bouquet against the headstone. Then he lit candles.

"Why do you do this?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You're a rational man. You can't believe in religious rituals."

"No," he told her, "I don't believe. I know they are just rituals."

"Why do it, then?"

He knew why, but he did not know how to give her that sermon. He did it because it was a gift. It was a liberating gift for him, because it was given with no thought of any profit or return. A deliberate gift with *no possibility* of return.

Those gifts were the stuff of history and futurity. Because gifts of that kind were also the gifts that the living received from the dead.

The gifts we received from the dead: those were the world's only genuine gifts. All the other things in the world were commodities. The dead were, by definition, those who gave to us without reward. And, especially: our dead gave to us, the living, within a dead context. Their gifts to us were not just abjectly generous, but archaic and profoundly confusing.

Whenever we disciplined ourselves, and sacrificed ourselves, in some vague hope of benefiting posterity, in some ambition to create a better future beyond our own moment in time, then we were doing something beyond a rational analysis. Those in that future could never see us with our own eyes: they would only see us with the eyes that we ourselves gave to them. Never with our own eyes: always with their own. And the future's eyes always saw the truths of the past as blinkered, backward, halting. Superstition.

"Why?" she said.

Borislav knocked the snow from his elegant shoes. "I have a big heart."

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A year or two have passed since Marta Randall's fiction last appeared in our pages. Actually more than two decades have passed since we ran "The View from Endless Scarp" (but who's counting?), so it behooves us to say a word or two about Ms. Randall's career. Her debut novel, Islands, *was published in 1976 and she has since published seven more, including* Journey, Those Who Favor Fire, *and the mystery* Growing Light. *She served as president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America and for most of the current century, she has been teaching writing classes for the Gotham Writer's Workshop—check out* http://www.writingclasses.com/ *for more info on the course.*

Her new story sticks to charted waters, but it plumbs the depths oh so nicely.

The Dark Boy

By Marta Randall

NANCY STOOD AT THE unmarked bus stop on the *carretera* in front of the resort. She zipped up her windbreaker against the cool dawn air and peered down the road, worried that she had misunderstood the concierge's directions, that the bus had changed its route and nobody knew, that she had been misled. But of course she hadn't. The bus rattled up. Chattering Mexican hotel maids and gardeners swung off and, passing her, politely nodded. When she climbed aboard, the driver and remaining passengers looked surprised. Tourists didn't ride the local bus, at least not middle-aged lady tourists, but there was no other way to reach town this early. She smiled nervously and paid her fare; two men jumped up and offered her the front bench seat. Cheeks flaming, she took it and stared out the window, and tangled her fingers together.

She could do this.

The land along the road into Cabo San Lucas reminded her of a checkerboard: lush tropical plantings interrupted, as though by a knife, by the real landscape, yellow and dry: cacti and strange parched trees and

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sawtoothed mountains in the distance, formed of gigantic bouldery rubble like the leftovers of some geological building site. Signs in Spanish flashed by. Huge, gated resorts, the concrete block skeletons of still more resorts, small businesses, occasional wildflowers to remind her that January is spring in Baja. The bus discharged passengers at other resorts. Pemex gas stations. Golf courses. Restaurants. A dilapidated bull ring, buildings pressing closer to each other, and the bus entered the town. Or, at least, the tourist part of town.

The driver pulled over in front of a *supermercado*. Nancy sat still for a moment before stepping down to the sidewalk. She watched the bus pull away.

She stood blinking in the Mexican sunlight, trying to get her bearings. It was already getting warm. Boulevard Marina curved away to the right, bordered on the harbor side by hotels and on this side by storefronts and tiny real estate offices and restaurants and curio shops and bars, pressed together in a jumble of pinks and yellows and blues. Grills rattled as merchants pulled them aside or rolled them up, preparing for the day; a few cars chugged past. There were no Americans visible. She took another calming breath. She could do this. A week spent hiding in her room, huddled behind sunglasses or newspapers on the resort's beach, calling for room service so as not to face anyone...it was ridiculous. Ginny would have laughed at her.

She had her money and papers in a Ziploc bag in the pocket of her jeans, and a rolled-up five-dollar bill for tips. She took out the ticket she had bought for the dawn whale-watching tour. The back of the ticket showed a map of downtown Cabo San Lucas. She looked at it, oriented herself, and started walking the five blocks to the marina. Except for the shopkeepers she was alone on the sidewalk; a few of them gestured toward their shops, but smiled and shrugged when she shook her head.

The shopkeepers' interest was practical and commercial, unlike the tourists back at the resort. There, she felt exposed and in jeopardy, a woman alone amid the couples, families, groups of friends. Ginny's kids had insisted that a week off would do her good, a chance to relax, to regroup, as though the week in Cabo was some consolation prize for the loss of their mother, her partner for twenty years. The tourists kept looking beyond her for the missing other, husband or child or friend,

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before turning their gazes back to her. She hated it. She felt as though she were on show. But Ginny's kids couldn't have known it would be like this, they with their snug families. She loved them. They loved her. They thought it would help. They had grown away into their own lives as she and Ginny had grown into each other's lives, and now Ginny was dead and she felt as though her leg had been amputated and her balance become perilous, and the people around her waited for her to fall.

She pulled her shoulders in and crossed a slanting street, up two steps to the next sidewalk, past a verandah restaurant with chairs upside down on the oilclothed tables. She slowed to peer at the menu painted above the bar.

In the next minute she was surrounded by children, so close that she almost tripped. They gathered and scattered around her, crying "Chiclets!" in high voices, holding out tiny bright boxes of gum. She caught her balance, pushing her palms out to ward them off, appalled at the attention. They jittered and bobbed and chattered like small, hungry birds.

"No, *por favor,*" she said in her broad American accent. "No, please, *no quiero,* no."

An older boy appeared among them, almond-eyed over broad, dark Indio cheekbones. The other children fell back as he thrust a handful of bright pottery marlins at her, each one no bigger than his thumb.

"Ver' cheap," he said, unsmiling. He was perhaps eleven or twelve, and almost as tall as she. She shook her head and tried to walk around him. The marlins disappeared, replaced by four small crystal dolphins on silver chains. He held them so close that she had to pull her head back to avoid them. The children giggled.

"*Delfines,*" he said, shaking the necklaces a little. "You like." But she didn't like, Ginny was the one who had loved the sea.

"No, please." She felt spotlighted; the heat of embarrassment rose toward her face.

Again his goods vanished and now he held small wooden sharks painted magenta and lemon and turquoise, the words "Cabo San Lucas" lettered on their fins.

"No!" She looked toward the shopkeepers but they ignored her, busy dragging displays onto the sidewalks. "*¡Nada!*"

The children tittered. "*¡Un dólar!*" he said.

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Ahead she saw the sign for the Hotel Plaza Las Glorias. The expedition office would be around its other side, fronting the marina.

This time he had tiny ocarinas, shaped like turtles. He put one to his lips and blew a thin, three-note melody. "*Muy bonito*," he said. "You kids they like. You like. *Un dólar*. Ver' cheap."

She ducked around him and ran the remaining block to and then through the hotel's interconnected buildings, to the broad stone quay. The chirping laughter faded; the boy didn't follow. She put her hands to the metal guardrail and gasped, waiting to cool down, while gulls and pelicans swooped over the fishing boats returning from the night's work. The operators of parasails, jet skis, and party boats prepared their equipment on the wharfs or stood talking and laughing in casual groups. She breathed in the harbor's aroma of salt and fish and cigarette smoke.

Ginny wouldn't have run, or let an insistent boy rattle her; Ginny wouldn't have been frightened by the staring, inquisitive tourists of the resort. The heat retreated from her cheeks and neck. Nancy took another, deeper breath, and straightened away from the guardrail. She flew home tomorrow; she had promised herself that she would see this one adventure through. She could do this. This, at least, Ginny could not take with her.

She didn't see the dark boy anywhere along the quay. After a moment she went to find the expedition office.

The hallway was noisy, crowded with young Americans barely out of their teens, so intent on themselves that they paid no attention as they let her pass. At the counter a short, bearded man and the clerk talked in a hodgepodge of English and Spanish. Apparently satisfied, the man gathered up a handful of papers and disappeared into the crowd.

"Students from California," the clerk told her. "They come to cruise *el Golfo de California*, to study, but before they go they whale-watch with us. You do not mind? We had to find another boat." The clerk cocked her head. "It is okay for you, yes? There is still much room."

To them, she was just another piece of adult furniture. It was okay for her, she realized. She nodded.

The clerk thanked her, stamped her ticket, and gave it back together with a brochure. Nancy put them both in her Ziploc bag and went out to the hallway. The crowd had thinned. She stood against a wall while the

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bearded man herded kids toward the quay. He followed the last one out and paused beside her.

"You on this trip? Come on then, before the damned tourists get here." One leg dragged a bit when he walked; he winnowed through a chaos of papers in his hands.

"This is a school trip?"

"Yeah. Study abroad. Two months." He looked at her, eyebrow raised, so obviously waiting for the next question that she asked it: "Oceanography? Marine bio — "

"English," he said. "Steinbeck. *Voyage of the Sea of Cortez*. We retrace the trip every winter. Costs a shitload. Kids love it, Regents love the money, I get the hassles." He stopped at the door, freed his right hand, and thrust it at her. "Al Scott."

"Nancy Auletta."

On the marina the kids, in everything from pony tails to face studs and spiky hair, crowded before a gate. When Scott showed up, the man guarding the gate let them through and they poured down stone steps to the wharf, jostling and shouting. Nancy hung back while Scott dealt the kids into two big Zodiac inflatables and the guides helped them in. When the kids were seated and struggling with their life jackets, Scott gestured her into a raft and climbed in after her.

"They flew in yesterday," he said, stowing papers in a shiny waterproof bag. "Now I find out who gets seasick. You want a life jacket? You're not with the group — you don't have to."

But of course she did want one and busied herself with the tangle of straps and carabiners. The boats' outboard motors jumped to life, roaring; they moved away from the dock. She buckled the last strap into place and looked up to see the quay and hotel falling away behind them. The insistent dark boy of the street sat beside the guide. He stared at her, expressionless.

She pulled her shoulders in until the life jacket nipped her armpits. She should insist that they take her back, or transfer her to the other boat. She should complain to the guide. Warn the boy away from her. What was the Spanish for "stay away from me?" *Atrás*? No, that couldn't be right. Not *afuera* either. Her stomach felt cold.

In the end she did nothing except turn away from the boy. She stared

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across the water toward the Pedregal, the spine of red rock running down the very end of Baja California. He wouldn't bother her here, not with all these other people around. She didn't want to make a spectacle of herself. It would be all right. The Zodiacs sped through the harbor, past early dive boats.

"El Arco," Al Scott shouted over the outboard's bellow, pointing to a tremendous arch carved in the tip of the narrowing peninsula, the Pacific's dark waters visible through it. The image was on almost every postcard she had seen. Ahead, two great gray spires rose from the water. "Lover's Beach," Scott shouted, pointing toward a strip of sand. The kids laughed and elbowed each other.

Sea lions basked on rocks, pelicans swooped after the fishing boats. When she had flown in, the thinning peninsula and the rocks had made Nancy think of reddish paint splattered over the blue sea, a trailing line and drips. The Zodiacs rounded the point. Waves kicked up and the ride roughened. They turned north a little and west, until the land was a smudged line on the horizon. The color of the sky was different here. The Zodiacs neared each other and the guides shouted, boat to boat. The boats slowed.

"Now we wait," the guide said. "We wait and watch." The outboards muttered, idling. The kids had been subdued since they reached the Pacific; now they stared at the sea on all sides. Water lifted the boats and dropped them again, an unsteady rhythm. From the corner of her eye, Nancy saw Al Scott's head move as he watched the students, not the water. It felt peaceful here, between two shades of blue.

"*Allí*," the dark boy said. In the distance a whale's tail reared into the sky and slid away. The kids gasped. Another tail followed the first. The motors idled and the kids described the tails to each other: they were black, no they were gray, no they had white on them, big white stripes. No they didn't.

"No barfing so far," Scott said with satisfaction. "That's one thing gone right at least. Goddamned cook quit, one set of luggage lost, government permissions aren't here yet." He spat over the Zodiac's side. "Goddamned cook."

The kids' chatter fell into silence. Nancy leaned against the side of the boat. The water rose and fell and rose, all the way out of sight beyond the

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curve of the world. Just water, rising and falling and rising again since time began and out until time ended. At the boat's side the water glittered. Ginny would have liked this.

On the other boat, a boy and girl shouted at each other. Nancy sat up. She couldn't make out the words. Scott cursed and said something in rapid Spanish to the guide; the outboard roared and they moved toward the other boat.

"I told her he's a dick," a girl near Nancy said. The wind had flattened her spiked orange hair.

"Don't you make trouble," Scott said to her. "I have enough of that."

They butted against the other boat. The guides held them together while Scott clambered across the sides, fired off questions, and sent the boy of the couple back to Nancy's boat, while Scott took his place. The boats pulled apart.

"Pig," the same girl muttered.

"Bitch," the boy muttered back.

They glared at each other and Nancy turned away, distressed. Was she supposed to do something?

"Bastard," the girl whispered.

"Gutter slut."

"That's enough, both of you," Scott shouted across the water. The kids looked at each other, startled, and back at him. He laughed.

The dark boy stood abruptly and waved his arms to signal Scott's boat, then pointed south. The boats moved, but Scott's boat drew farther ahead.

"Why aren't we keeping up?" the new boy demanded "They'll see all the whales."

"Enough *ballenas* for ever'body," the guide said. The outboard dropped another octave; they were stopping. She risked a glance back. The dark boy gazed west and they all gazed with him. Small waves slapped against the Zodiac's hull. Scott's boat was almost out of sight.

"*Mira*," the boy said, and not more than thirty feet away a plume of spray broke the surface, followed by a whale's broad, mottled back. The kids gasped. Within two heartbeats another appeared. They curved back under the sea, like the humps of a descending sea serpent.

"Did you see that, did you see?" a kid whispered.

"Can we get closer?" another said, but neither the guide nor the dark

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boy answered. Nancy looked toward them. The guide scanned the sea, his hand tight on the rudder. The outboard muttered and died.

The dark boy met her eyes as though he had been waiting for her. His right hand stretched out over the water, palm up, fingers taut and spread. The kids, oblivious, disagreed over the whales, the colors of their backs, their spouts.

"*¿La señora quiere mas*?" the boy said, moving his hand a little as though presenting the sea to her.

She narrowed her eyes at him, outraged that he would take credit for the whales. He turned his hand. Water shifted and murmured and the great mammals surfaced, so close that the raft bobbed. The kids shrieked and went silent, awestruck. The whales blew and the stench of it filled the air. Waves slapped against the boat.

Nancy clutched the ropes along the Zodiac's side."You didn't do that," she whispered.

He shifted around the guide to sit on the same side as Nancy, and leaned over the water away from the whales. He stretched out his left arm, palm down. For a breath nothing happened, then an immense dark back rose through the clear water, coming up and up like the ocean's floor rising to touch them. Nancy couldn't breathe. The whale hovered just below the surface, each scar and barnacle distinct. The dark boy slowly turned his palm up and the whale sank. She stared at the boy, astonished beyond thought. He stared back and turned his palm down, and again the great back rose. After a moment the boy withdrew his arm and the whale sank out of sight.

It couldn't have taken more than a minute. The guide and students remained riveted to the show on the other side; the second Zodiac was out of sight.

The boy's hand lay atop the raft's side. She put out her right hand, hesitated, and touched it. He raised his hand and turned it, back to palm to back, under her fingertips. His nails were dirty and ragged; calluses ridged his palms.

After a moment he pulled his hand away and moved his attention beyond her. The raft had floated away from the two whales. Now their tails rose one after the other and they slid under the water.

The boy grinned at the students. "You like," he said.

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Yes, they told him. Yes, it was rad, it was the bomb, could he find them again?

The boy shrugged. "Today no more." The kids protested but the guide busied himself with the outboard. He told the students to watch for dolphins on the way back and they settled in the raft's bow. The engines sputtered, caught, died, sputtered, died.

She laid her right hand in her lap and stared at the water. It seemed a moving sameness of color, but at the raft's side, where the boy had held his hand, the surface was a million tinier surfaces, small flat planes rising, shifting, growing, replacing each other, tilting away, an unimagined complexity. She felt her breath begin to steady. Tentatively, she reached her arm over the side and opened her hand, palm down. Nothing happened. She looked up to see the dark boy looking at her. He nodded and turned away.

The outboard caught and roared. The Zodiac's nose lifted as they headed back and the kids yelled, happy with the speed. They caught up with Scott's boat and raced it around Finisterra, Land's End, toward the harbor. As they entered it their pace slowed and they moved through the flotsam of the harbor, among yachts and empty tequila bottles and plastic grocery bags floating like strange jellyfish, and seagulls fighting over guts dumped from fishing boats. They had been gone longer than Nancy thought. On one boat, a drunken tourist pulled his shorts down and mooned them. The kids jeered.

When they reached the dock she came slowly out of the boat. The dark boy's glance swept by her, as it swept by the kids, bright and impersonal. From one moment to the next he had become another scruffy street kid, jumping to tie lines, working for tips. Scott swung onto the wharf, bright bag in hand. She fumbled in her pocket and, as she passed him, she gave him her rolled-up tip money and nodded at the boy, and Scott nodded back. She climbed the stone steps to where the students were shedding their life jackets and added hers to the pile. The kids from Scott's boat didn't believe the others had seen whales so near, and when they did they complained about it. The kids from Nancy's boat laughed at them.

"That was da bomb!" one of them said to her, and she agreed that indeed, it was the bomb.

"Fly," another said.

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"Way fly!"

"Way *trez* fly."

"The ginchiest," a fourth kid said, solemnly, before they fell over themselves, laughing and repeating the word.

Last of all, having tipped the boatmen, Al Scott came up, his limp more pronounced on the steps. Nancy looked beyond him to the boats but the dark boy was gone. A few of the students had wandered off amid the blanket and curio vendors who now worked the quay and Scott shouted at them until they came back and gathered up their life jackets. Tourists strolled past or sat in the open-air cafes, pointing and talking and shading their eyes. Nancy looked away from them, toward El Arco and the sea beyond.

Her flight left tomorrow morning. Back to her own language and people, back to the home she and Ginny had shared for so many years; back to Ginny's kids, whom she loved and who loved her in return. Back to her own safe place. She raised her arm a little and, palm down, spread her fingers above the pale warm stones. As she expected, nothing happened.

When Al Scott walked by, herding the kids toward their bus, she put out her hand to stop him.

"I can cook," she said.

—for Peg, with love

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

SOMETHING WICKER THIS WAY COMES

YOU HAVE TO wonder where this remake thing is leading. It appears the rulers of that Earthly paradise known as Studio City will go to any extreme to avoid an original thought, and thus in recent years we've been blessed with an endless succession of films seeking to Americanize (more chases, explosions, CGI; less emphasis on character and story) the work of foreign auteurs and classic and not-so-classic movies of the past. We've had remakes in name only, films that lift a basic concept and/or title, taking these elements in a new and usually disastrous direction. We've had oddities like Gus Van Sant's shot-by-shot remake of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, a movie whose Borgesian conceit was that a work of art recreated in an era different from that of the original will produce a different effect on the viewer — sad to say, the effect produced was of intense disinterest. There have been a handful of successes (John Carpenter's *The Thing* springs to mind), but for every success there are a myriad abominations. My list of most abominable includes: *Payback*, wherein Mel Gibson, before his insanity became a matter of public record, managed to strip John Boorman's *Point Blank* of all its malevolent brilliance; the Ethan Hawke-Gwyneth Paltrow version of *Great Expectations*, wherein a great novel is morphed into a gag-inducing soap opera; *Cousins*, which reenvisioned Jean Charles Tacchella's sharply written romantic comedy, *Cousin, Cousine*, as a vehicle for Ted Danson and Isabella Rosselini, a couple who set a standard for Least On-screen Chemistry (Say it to yourself. Contemplate the awfulness. Ted Danson? Isabella

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Rosellini?) challenged only by the pairing of Kevin Costner and Whitney Houston in *The Bodyguard*...yet another remake.

The list is, apparently, endless.

So what lies ahead?

A robot *My Fair Lady*? *2001: A Space Odyssey* set in an ant farm?

My theory is that the world will one day be All Remakes All the Time, that science will provide tools that permit us to reinvent ourselves ceaselessly, and we will spend our days gazing into technical mirrors, reimagining our lives as pirates, lonely milkmaids, and giants, until at last, having exhausted the realm of possibility, life becomes so terminally tedious and unpalatable that we expire from lack of interest.

Which brings me to *The Wicker Man*.

The original film was made in the early '70s, a period during which directors such as George A. Romero, Mario Bava, Dario Argento, Tobe Hooper, et al, were reinvigorating the horror genre, and the king of the genre, Hammer Films, was slumping into irrelevance, churning out the same old bodice-ripping vampire/monster flicks they had been making for years, many starring Christopher Lee. Lee wanted to catch the new wave in genre film and sought to persuade Hammer to be more adventurous; they, however, were pleased with the status quo, so Lee went to another English movie company, Shepperton Studios, and there he succeeded in getting a project made that satisfied his notion of the direction in which the new British horror should travel.

Lee's project, *The Wicker Man*, is not a great film. Far from it. Yet it might have come close with a bit more of a budget and a little tweaking. Derived from an intelligent script by Anthony Shaffer, a curious amalgam of mystery, horror, and musical, it relates the story of an English policeman named Howie, a forty-year-old virgin deeply committed to his Christian faith and soon to be married, who is summoned by an anonymous letter to an offshore island, Summerisle, there to investigate the disappearance of a young girl. He soon discovers that the island does not merely produce apples of surpassing flavor, but has also bred what to Howie's mind is the pernicious evil of paganism. Everywhere he goes, he finds evidence that deepens the mystery surrounding the girl's disappearance, and he begins to suspect that she is to be sacrificed in a pagan rite. Paganism has been ingrained into every aspect of the

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island's life, and especially disturbing to Howie are the sexual overtones of the religion. On a visit to Lord Summerisle (Lee), the de facto ruler of the island, Howie sees young women dancing naked within a ring of standing stones, leaping over a fire in hopes that the god of the harvest will impregnate them. Schoolgirls chant ritualistically while boys overtly celebrate the phallus by dancing about a maypole. At night in his hotel room, he is sorely tempted by a nude Britt Eklund, who performs a dance of sexual abandon while Howie struggles with his conscience and his faith, ultimately winning the battle with himself thanks to his devoutness...or is it fear? Fear of contagion, of some masculine inadequacy. Whatever the case, his preoccupation prevents him from seeing the jaws of a trap closing upon him.

Each of these occasions and others are accompanied by songs, and the songs comprise both the film's most grievous flaw and one of its greatest virtues. Had they been blended more naturally into the picture, had they not been lip-synched over studio recordings made by professional singers and sung by actors in their natural off-key voices, if their number had been cut by two or three, they would, I think, have achieved the intended result, that of creating a believable pagan culture, an island kingdom informed by ancient laws in the midst of the modern world. As it stands, that result *is* achieved, though not without some difficulty on the part of the viewer — one tends to be distanced from the film during these sequences. But Edward Woodward's performance as the uptight yet essentially decent and dutiful Howie holds the movie together. Woodward, mainly known here for his work on the American TV series, *The Equalizer*, has some excellent performances on his resume, yet none more central to the success of its film than his role in *The Wicker Man*.

Most movie stars have inordinately big heads and relatively tiny bodies. It's true. People with those physical attributes photograph well. If you're ever at a celebrity event, take a quick look around — your first impression will be that you're in a room full of bobbleheads. I mention this fact not only because it seems strange, but because the star of the remake of the *The Wicker Man*, Nicolas Cage, is a prime example of that freakish subpopulace. I haven't measured Nick's cranium, but a casual eyeballing

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causes me to suspect that he rivals Matt Dillon for the lead in size-of-head-to-size-of-body ratio among contemporary Hollywood actors. Unfortunately, this does not reflect a commensurate largeness of talent, for Cage is among the most incompetent leading men of his generation. His emotional quiver contains a very few arrows. Notable among them is what passes for a grim, smouldering look — it can also pass for a constipated look, but I'm assuming that Cage intends grim and smouldering, because there are few roles that memorialize the constipated...though it's possible a TV Movie of the Week may have been devoted to the cause. By means of this grim, smouldering look, then, he is able convey passion, anger, sadness, bewilderment, deep thought, lower abdominal pain, etc. Another look Cage relies on heavily consists of showing his teeth and widening his eyes, presenting the image of an affrighted horse — thus does he convey fear, grief, outrage, effort, shock, and so on. Such an unnuanced style of acting, albeit economical to a fault, does not qualify Cage to carry a motion picture. But even an inept actor can do credible work if the direction is strong and the writing incisive. Therefore most of the blame for the remake's calamitous failure must be laid at the feet of writer/director Neil LaBute.

LaBute, who's done at least one decent studio picture *(Nurse Betty)*, has stripped *The Wicker Man* of subtext and reduced it to exactly what Christopher Lee was trying to escape — a stock horror film replete with jump scares and CGI foolishness. The story is much the same, the scene-by-scene progression virtually identical, but the changes that LaBute *has* made cripple the film. For example, the idea of playing a virgin may not have set well with Cage's ego or, as has been published, it might have been deemed unbelievable in this day and age. Yet such men do exist today, religious types with an abiding conviction that out-of-wedlock sex is sinful, and surely a character of this sort would have been more interesting than — and just as believeable as — the below-average Joe character created by LaBute's script. In the remake, the vanished girl is Cage's daughter and the mother is his old fiancée who left him without explanation years before (this proves to be a cold-blooded tradition among the island women). And so we are left with a shopworn horror trope — the righteous man invading a bastion of

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evil in order to save an innocent. It could scarcely be more ho-hum if he were dressed in a cassock and armed with a cross.

One refreshing quality of the original film was that it presented paganism as a religious choice, devoid of supernatural claptrap, and presented Howie's Christianity as an equally reasonable (or unreasonable) choice. Both faiths were depicted as extreme yet culturally appropriate, and this made the picture's ending seem all the more horrific. In LaBute's version, paganism manifests as a sinister Mother Goddess bee cult led by a queen, Sister Summerisle (Ellen Burstyn) — this allows the director to bash his favorite villains (women) and to belabor the theme of men versus women, which he investigated to better effect in *The Company of Men* and *Your Friends And Neighbors*. That Cage (who plays Edward Malus, a character named for a genus of apple that is dependent on pollination by bees) is shown knocking three women unconscious reminds us of how greatly the director relishes his misogyny. In most of his pictures, he portrays women as alien and cruel, but here he forces the template of those views onto materials they do not suit; thus the movie feels disjointed, haphazard, and devoid of context. Without the necessary foreshadowing, a scene in which Sister Summerisle, resplendent in white robes, lies in her royal bed, flanked by handmaidens, comes across as comedic. The entire ending, in which Cage, relying on Look Number Two (affrighted horse), is chased through a forest by a posse of castrating hippie shrews costumed as deer, chickens, ravens, kitties, etc., is downright laughable. From the point at which Cage hijacks the local schoolteacher's means of transportation, whipping out his piece and commanding her to "Step away from the bicycle!", we realize that all is lost and we might as well sit back and enjoy the yucks, because not even an Edward Woodward could have saved this movie.

On a brighter note, let me recommend Dominik Moll's *Lemming*, a French psychodrama/thriller/horror film available on DVD. Spearheaded by brilliant performances from Charlotte Gainsbourg, Laurent Lucas, and Charlotte Rampling, it tells of what happens to a young engineer (Laurent), the inventor of a flying webcam, and his wife (Gainsbourg) after they invite his new boss and his steely wife (Rampling) to dinner. Presaging the strange character of the disaster to

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come, the young couple find that one of their drains has been clogged by a dead lemming, a type of rodent native to Scandinavia. The dinner turns into a suburban nightmare, with Rampling — wearing sunglasses and armored in haut couture — lashing out at her purportedly unfaithful husband in devastating style. When Rampling leaves her husband, she moves into the couple's spare bedroom and, shortly thereafter, commits suicide. Gradually, the young wife seems to acquire the personality of the dead woman, but this is no simple story of possession. As the house changes into a virtual haunted house, a transformation masterfully handled by Moll, assisted by David Whitaker's unsettling score, the movie enters Lynchian territory and begins to mess with your head. If you have recently seen LaBute's botched job of thematic transplant, and I hope that you have not, you may require an antidote, and *Lemming* should fill your prescription.

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A film adaptation of Neil Gaiman's Stardust *is due out in March with a cast that includes Michelle Pfeiffer, Robert De Niro, Claire Danes, and Charlie Cox. His most recent book is* Fragile Things: Short Fictions and Wonders, *which is where this unsettling story first appeared. We reprint it here by kind permission of William Morrow & Co., an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.*

How to Talk to Girls at Parties

By Neil Gaiman

"COME ON," SAID VIC. "IT'LL be great."

"No, it won't," I said, although I'd lost this fight hours ago, and I knew it.

"It'll be brilliant," said Vic, for the hundredth time. "Girls! Girls! Girls!" He grinned with white teeth.

We both attended an all-boys' school in South London. While it would be a lie to say that we had no experience with girls — Vic seemed to have had many girlfriends, while I had kissed three of my sister's friends — it would, I think, be perfectly true to say that we both chiefly spoke to, interacted with, and only truly understood, other boys. Well, I did, anyway. It's hard to speak for someone else, and I've not seen Vic for thirty years. I'm not sure that I would know what to say to him now if I did.

We were walking the back streets that used to twine in a grimy maze behind East Croydon station — a friend had told Vic about a party, and Vic was determined to go whether I liked it or not, and I didn't. But my parents were away that week at a conference, and I was Vic's guest at his house, so I was trailing along beside him.

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"It'll be the same as it always is," I said. "After an hour you'll be off somewhere snogging the prettiest girl at the party, and I'll be in the kitchen listening to somebody's mum going on about politics or poetry or something."

"You just have to *talk* to them," he said. "I think it's probably that road at the end here." He gestured cheerfully, swinging the bag with the bottle in it.

"Don't you know?"

"Alison gave me directions and I wrote them on a bit of paper, but I left it on the hall table. S'okay. I can find it."

"How?" Hope welled slowly up inside me.

"We walk down the road," he said, as if speaking to an idiot child. "And we look for the party. Easy."

I looked, but saw no party: just narrow houses with rusting cars or bikes in their concreted front gardens; and the dusty glass fronts of newsagents, which smelled of alien spices and sold everything from birthday cards and second-hand comics to the kind of magazines that were so pornographic that they were sold already sealed in plastic bags. I had been there when Vic had slipped one of those magazines beneath his sweater, but the owner caught him on the pavement outside and made him give it back.

We reached the end of the road and turned into a narrow street of terraced houses. Everything looked very still and empty in the Summer's evening. "It's all right for you," I said. "They fancy you. You don't actually *have* to talk to them." It was true: one urchin grin from Vic and he could have his pick of the room.

"Nah. S'not like that. You've just got to talk."

The times I had kissed my sister's friends I had not spoken to them. They had been around while my sister was off doing something elsewhere, and they had drifted into my orbit, and so I had kissed them. I do not remember any talking. I did not know what to say to girls, and I told him so.

"They're just girls," said Vic. "They don't come from another planet."

As we followed the curve of the road around, my hopes that the party would prove unfindable began to fade: a low pulsing noise, music muffled by walls and doors, could be heard from a house up ahead. It was eight in

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the evening, not that early if you aren't yet sixteen, and we weren't. Not quite.

I had parents who liked to know where I was, but I don't think Vic's parents cared that much. He was the youngest of five boys. That in itself seemed magical to me: I merely had two sisters, both younger than I was, and I felt both unique and lonely. I had wanted a brother as far back as I could remember. When I turned thirteen, I stopped wishing on falling stars or first stars, but back when I did, a brother was what I had wished for.

We went up the garden path, crazy paving leading us past a hedge and a solitary rose bush to a pebble-dashed facade. We rang the doorbell, and the door was opened by a girl. I could not have told you how old she was, which was one of the things about girls I had begun to hate: when you start out as kids you're just boys and girls, going through time at the same speed, and you're all five, or seven, or eleven, together. And then one day there's a lurch and the girls just sort of sprint off into the future ahead of you, and they know all about everything, and they have periods and breasts and makeup and God-only-knew-what-else — for I certainly didn't. The diagrams in biology textbooks were no substitute for being, in a very real sense, young adults. And the girls of our age were.

Vic and I weren't young adults, and I was beginning to suspect that even when I started needing to shave every day, instead of once every couple of weeks, I would still be way behind.

The girl said, "Hello?"

Vic said, "We're friends of Alison's." We had met Alison, all freckles and orange hair and a wicked smile, in Hamburg, on a German Exchange. The exchange organizers had sent some girls with us, from a local girls' school, to balance the sexes. The girls, our age, more or less, were raucous and funny, and had more or less adult boyfriends with cars and jobs and motorbikes and — in the case of one girl with crooked teeth and a raccoon coat, who spoke to me about it sadly at the end of a party in Hamburg, in, of course, the kitchen — a wife and kids.

"She isn't here," said the girl at the door. "No Alison."

"Not to worry," said Vic, with an easy grin. "I'm Vic. This is Enn." A beat, and then the girl smiled back at him. Vic had a bottle of white wine in a plastic bag, removed from his parents' kitchen cabinet. "Where should I put this, then?"

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She stood out of the way, letting us enter. "There's a kitchen in the back," she said. "Put it on the table there, with the other bottles." She had golden, wavy hair, and she was very beautiful. The hall was dim in the twilight, but I could see that she was beautiful.

"What's your name, then?" said Vic.

She told him it was Stella, and he grinned his crooked white grin and told her that that had to be the prettiest name he had ever heard. Smooth bastard. And what was worse was that he said it like he meant it.

Vic headed back to drop off the wine in the kitchen, and I looked into the front room, where the music was coming from. There were people dancing in there. Stella walked in, and she started to dance, swaying to the music all alone, and I watched her.

This was during the early days of punk. On our own record players we would play the Adverts and the Jam, the Stranglers and the Clash and the Sex Pistols. At other people's parties you'd hear ELO or 10cc or even Roxy Music. Maybe some Bowie, if you were lucky. During the German Exchange, the only LP that we had all been able to agree on was Neil Young's *Harvest*, and his song "Heart of Gold" had threaded through the trip like a refrain: *I crossed the ocean for a heart of gold....*

The music playing in that front room wasn't anything I recognized. It sounded a bit like a German electronic pop group called Kraftwerk, and a bit like an LP I'd been given for my last birthday, of strange sounds made by the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. The music had a beat, though, and the half-dozen girls in that room were moving gently to it, although I only looked at Stella. She shone.

Vic pushed past me, into the room. He was holding a can of lager. "There's booze back in the kitchen," he told me. He wandered over to Stella and he began to talk to her. I couldn't hear what they were saying over the music, but I knew that there was no room for me in that conversation.

I didn't like beer, not back then. I went off to see if there was something I wanted to drink. On the kitchen table stood a large bottle of Coca-Cola, and I poured myself a plastic tumblerful, and I didn't dare say anything to the pair of girls who were talking in the underlit kitchen. They were animated and utterly lovely. Each of them had very black skin and glossy hair and movie star clothes, and their accents were foreign, and each of them was out of my league.

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I wandered, Coke in hand.

The house was deeper than it looked, larger and more complex than the two-up two-down model I had imagined. The rooms were underlit — I doubt there was a bulb of more than forty watts in the building — and each room I went into was inhabited: in my memory, inhabited only by girls. I did not go upstairs.

A girl was the only occupant of the conservatory. Her hair was so fair it was white, and long, and straight, and she sat at the glass-topped table, her hands clasped together, staring at the garden outside, and the gathering dusk. She seemed wistful.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" I asked, gesturing with my cup. She shook her head, and then followed it up with a shrug, to indicate that it was all the same to her. I sat down.

Vic walked past the conservatory door. He was talking to Stella, but he looked in at me, sitting at the table, wrapped in shyness and awkwardness, and he opened and closed his hand in a parody of a speaking mouth. *Talk.* Right.

"Are you from 'round here?" I asked the girl.

She shook her head. She wore a low-cut silvery top, and I tried not to stare at the swell of her breasts.

I said, "What's your name? I'm Enn."

"Wain's Wain," she said, or something that sounded like it. "I'm a second."

"That's uh. That's a different name."

She fixed me with huge liquid eyes. "It indicates that my progenitor was also Wain, and that I am obliged to report back to her. I may not breed."

"Ah. Well. Bit early for that anyway, isn't it?"

She unclasped her hands, raised them above the table, spread her fingers. "You see?" The little finger on her left hand was crooked, and it bifurcated at the top, splitting into two smaller fingertips. A minor deformity. "When I was finished a decision was needed. Would I be retained, or eliminated? I was fortunate that the decision was with me. Now, I travel, while my more perfect sisters remain at home in stasis. They were firsts. I am a second.

"Soon I must return to Wain, and tell her all I have seen. All my impressions of this place of yours."

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"I don't actually live in Croydon," I said. "I don't come from here." I wondered if she was American. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"As you say," she agreed, "neither of us comes from here." She folded her six-fingered left hand beneath her right, as if tucking it out of sight. "I had expected it to be bigger, and cleaner, and more colorful. But still, it is a jewel."

She yawned, covered her mouth with her right hand, only for a moment, before it was back on the table again. "I grow weary of the journeying, and I wish sometimes that it would end. On a street in Rio, at Carnival, I saw them on a bridge, golden and tall and insect-eyed and winged, and elated I almost ran to greet them, before I saw that they were only people in costumes. I said to Hola Colt, 'Why do they try so hard to look like us?' and Hola Colt replied, 'Because they hate themselves, all shades of pink and brown, and so small.' It is what I experience, even me, and I am not grown. It is like a world of children, or of elves." Then she smiled, and said, "It was a good thing they could not any of them see Hola Colt."

"Um," I said, "Do you want to dance?"

She shook her head immediately. "It is not permitted," she said. "I can do nothing that might cause damage to property. I am Wain's."

"Would you like something to drink, then?"

"Water," she said.

I went back to the kitchen and poured myself another Coke, and filled a cup with water from the tap. From the kitchen back to the hall, and from there into the conservatory, but now it was quite empty.

I wondered if the girl had gone to the toilet, and if she might change her mind about dancing later. I walked back to the front room and stared in. The room was filling up. There were more girls dancing, and several lads I didn't know, who looked older than me and Vic. The lads and the girls all kept their distance, but Vic was holding Stella's hand as they danced, and when the song ended he put an arm around her, casually, almost proprietorially, to make sure that nobody else cut in.

I wondered if the girl I had been talking to in the conservatory was now upstairs, as she did not appear to be on the ground floor.

I walked into the living room, which was across the hall from the room where the people were dancing, and I sat down on the sofa. There was

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a girl sitting there already. She had dark hair, cut short and spiky, and a nervous manner.

Talk, I thought. "Um, this mug of water's going spare," I told her, "If you want it?"

She nodded, and reached out her hand and took the mug, extremely carefully, as if she were unused to taking things, as if she could trust neither her vision nor her hands.

"I love being a tourist," she said, and smiled hesitantly. She had a gap between her two front teeth, and she sipped the tap water as if she were an adult sipping a fine wine. "The last tour, we went to sun, and we swam in sunfire pools with the whales. We heard their histories and we shivered in the chill of the outer places, then we swam deepward where the heat churned and comforted us.

"I wanted to go back. This time, I wanted it. There was so much I had not seen. Instead we came to world. Do you like it?"

"Like what?"

She gestured vaguely to the room — the sofa, the armchairs, the curtains, the unused gas fire.

"It's all right, I suppose."

"I told them I did not wish to visit world," she said. "My parent-teacher was unimpressed. 'You will have much to learn,' it told me. I said 'I could learn more in sun, again. Or in the deeps. Jessa spun webs between galaxies. I want to do that.'

"But there was no reasoning with it, and I came to world. Parent-teacher engulfed me, and I was here, embodied in a decaying lump of meat hanging on a frame of calcium. As I incarnated I felt things deep inside me, fluttering and pumping and squishing. It was my first experience with pushing air through the mouth, vibrating the vocal cords on the way, and I used it to tell parent-teacher that I wished that I would die, which it acknowledged was the inevitable exit strategy from world."

There were black worry beads wrapped around her wrist, and she fiddled with them as she spoke. "But knowledge is there, in the meat," she said, "and I am resolved to learn from it."

We were sitting close at the center of the sofa now. I decided I should put an arm around her, but casually. I would extend my arm along the back of the sofa and eventually sort of creep it down, almost imperceptibly,

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until it was touching her. She said, "The thing with the liquid in the eyes, when the world blurs. Nobody told me, and I still do not understand. I have touched the folds of the Whisper and pulsed and flown with the tachyon swans, and I still do not understand."

She wasn't the prettiest girl there, but she seemed nice enough, and she was a girl, anyway. I let my arm slide down a little, tentatively, so that it made contact with her back, and she did not tell me to take it away.

Vic called to me then, from the doorway. He was standing with his arm around Stella, protectively, waving at me. I tried to let him know, by shaking my head, that I was onto something, but he called my name, and, reluctantly, I got up from the sofa, and walked over to the door. "What?"

"Er. Look. The party," said Vic, apologetically. "It's not the one I thought it was. I've been talking to Stella and I figured it out. Well, she sort of explained it to me. We're at a different party."

"Christ. Are we in trouble? Do we have to go?"

Stella shook her head. He leaned down and kissed her, gently, on the lips. "You're just happy to have me here, aren't you darlin'?"

"You know I am," she told him.

He looked from her back to me, and he smiled his white smile: roguish, loveable, a little bit Artful Dodger, a little bit wide-boy Prince Charming. "Don't worry. They're all tourists here anyway. It's a foreign exchange thing, innit? Like when we all went to Germany."

"It is?"

"Enn. You got to *talk* to them. And that means you got to listen to them too. You understand?"

"I *did*. I already talked to a couple of them."

"You getting anywhere?"

"I was till you called me over."

"Sorry about that. Look, I just wanted to fill you in. Right?"

And he patted my arm and he walked away with Stella. Then, together, the two of them went up the stairs.

Understand me, all the girls at that party, in the twilight, were lovely; they all had perfect faces, but, more important than that, they had whatever strangeness of proportion, of oddness or humanity it is that makes a beauty something more than a shop-window dummy. Stella was the most lovely of any of them, but she, of course, was Vic's, and

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they were going upstairs together, and that was just how things would always be.

There were several people now sitting on the sofa, talking to the gap-toothed girl. Someone told a joke, and they all laughed. I would have had to push my way in there to sit next to her again, and it didn't look like she was expecting me back, or cared that I had gone, so I wandered out into the hall. I glanced in at the dancers and found myself wondering where the music was coming from. I couldn't see a record player or speakers.

From the hall I walked back to the kitchen.

Kitchens are good at parties. You never need an excuse to be there, and, on the good side, at this party I couldn't see any signs of someone's mum. I inspected the various bottles and cans on the kitchen table, then I poured a half an inch of Pernod into the bottom of my plastic cup, which I filled to the top with Coke. I dropped in a couple of ice cubes, and took a sip, relishing the sweetshop tang of the drink.

"What's that you're drinking?" A girl's voice.

"It's Pernod," I told her. "It tastes like aniseed balls, only it's alcoholic." I didn't say that I only tried it because I'd heard someone in the crowd ask for a Pernod on a live Velvet Underground LP.

"Can I have one?" I poured another Pernod, topped it off with Coke, passed it to her. Her hair was a coppery auburn, and it tumbled around her head in ringlets. It's not a hair style you see much now, but you saw it a lot back then.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Triolet," she said.

"Pretty name," I told her, although I wasn't sure that it was. She was pretty, though.

"It's a verse form," she said, proudly. "Like me."

"You're a poem?"

She smiled and looked down and away, perhaps bashfully. Her profile was almost flat — a perfect Grecian nose that came down from her forehead in a straight line. We did *Antigone* in the school theater the previous year. I was the messenger who brings Creon the news of Antigone's death. We wore half-masks that made us look like that. I thought of that play, looking at her face, in the kitchen, and I thought of Barry Smith's drawings of women in the *Conan* comics: five years later I

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would have thought of the Pre-Raphaelites, of Jane Morris and Lizzie Siddall. But I was only fifteen, then.

"You're a poem?" I repeated.

She chewed her lower lip. "If you want. I am poem, or I am a pattern, or a race of people whose world was swallowed by the sea."

"Isn't it hard to be three things at the same time?"

"What's your name?"

"Enn."

"So you are Enn," she said. "And you are a male. And you are a biped. Is it hard to be three things at the same time?"

"But they aren't different things. I mean, they aren't contradictory." It was a word I had read many times but never said aloud before that night, and I put the stresses in the wrong places. *Con*tradic*tory*.

She wore a thin dress, made of a white, silky fabric. Her eyes were a pale green, a color that would now make me think of colored contact lenses; but this was thirty years ago; things were different then. I remember wondering about Vic and Stella, upstairs. By now, I was sure that they were in one of the bedrooms, and I envied Vic so much it hurt.

Still, I was talking to this girl, even if we were talking nonsense, even if her name wasn't really Triolet (my generation had not been given hippie names: all the Rainbows and the Sunshines and the Moons, they were only six, seven, eight years old back then). She said, "We knew that it would soon be over, and so we put it all into a poem, to tell the universe who we were, and why we were here, and what we said and did and thought and dreamed and yearned for. We wrapped our dreams in words and patterned the words so that they would live forever, unforgettable. Then we sent the poem as a pattern of flux, to wait in the heart of a star, beaming out its message in pulses and bursts and fuzzes across the electromagnetic spectrum, until the time when, on worlds a thousand sun-systems distant, the pattern would be decoded and read, and it would become a poem once again."

"And then what happened?"

She looked at me with her green eyes, and it was as if she stared out at me from her own Antigone half-mask; but as if her pale green eyes were just a different, deeper, part of the mask. "You cannot hear a poem without it changing you," she told me. "They heard it, and it colonized them. It

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inherited them and it inhabited them, its rhythms becoming part of the way that they thought; its images permanently transmuting their metaphors; its verses, its outlook, its aspirations becoming their lives. Within a generation their children would be born already knowing the poem, and, sooner rather than later, as these things go, there were no more children born. There was no need for them, not any longer. There was only a poem, which took flesh and walked and spread itself across the vastness of the known."

I edged closer to her, so I could feel my leg pressing against hers. She seemed to welcome it: she put her hand on my arm, affectionately, and I felt a smile spreading across my face.

"There are places that we are welcomed," said Triolet, "and places where we are regarded as a noxious weed, or as a disease, something immediately to be quarantined and eliminated. But where does contagion end and art begin?"

"I don't know," I said, still smiling. I could hear the unfamiliar music as it pulsed and scattered and boomed in the front room.

She leaned into me then and—I suppose it was a kiss.... I suppose. She pressed her lips to my lips, anyway, and then, satisfied, she pulled back, as if she had now marked me as her own.

"Would you like to hear it?" she asked, and I nodded, unsure what she was offering me, but certain that I needed anything she was willing to give me.

She began to whisper something in my ear. It's the strangest thing about poetry — you can tell it's poetry, even if you don't speak the language. You can hear Homer's Greek without understanding a word, and you still know it's poetry. I've heard Polish poetry, and Inuit poetry, and I knew what it was without knowing. Her whisper was like that. I didn't know the language, but her words washed through me, perfect, and in my mind's eye I saw towers of glass and diamond; and people with eyes of the palest green; and, unstoppable, beneath every syllable, I could feel the relentless advance of the ocean.

Perhaps I kissed her properly. I don't remember. I know I wanted to.

And then Vic was shaking me violently. "Come on!" he was shouting. "Quickly. Come on!"

In my head I began to come back from a thousand miles away.

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"Idiot. Come on. Just get a move on," he said, and he swore at me. There was fury in his voice.

For the first time that evening I recognized one of the songs being played in the front room. A sad saxophone wail followed by a cascade of liquid chords, a man's voice singing cut-up lyrics about the sons of the silent age. I wanted to stay and hear the song.

She said, "I am not finished. There is yet more of me."

"Sorry love," said Vic, but he wasn't smiling any longer. "There'll be another time," and he grabbed me by the elbow and he twisted and pulled, forcing me from the room. I did not resist. I knew from experience that Vic could beat the stuffing out me if he got it into his head to do so. He wouldn't do it unless he was upset or angry, but he was angry now.

Out into the front hall. As Vic pulled open the door, I looked back one last time, over my shoulder, hoping to see Triolet in the doorway to the kitchen, but she was not there. I saw Stella, though, at the top of the stairs. She was staring down at Vic, and I saw her face.

This all happened thirty years ago. I have forgotten much, and I will forget more, and in the end I will forget everything; yet, if I have any certainty of life beyond death, it is all wrapped up not in psalms or hymns, but in this one thing alone: I cannot believe that I will ever forget that moment, or forget the expression on Stella's face as she watched Vic hurrying away from her. Even in death I shall remember that.

Her clothes were in disarray, and there was makeup smudged across her face, and her eyes —

You wouldn't want to make a universe angry. I bet an angry universe would look at you with eyes like that.

We ran then, me and Vic, away from the party and the tourists and the twilight, ran as if a lightning storm was on our heels, a mad helterskelter dash down the confusion of streets, threading through the maze, and we did not look back, and we did not stop until we could not breathe; and then we stopped and panted, unable to run any longer. We were in pain. I held onto a wall, and Vic threw up, hard and long, in the gutter.

He wiped his mouth.

"She wasn't a — " He stopped.

He shook his head.

Then he said, "You know...I think there's a thing. When you've gone

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as far as you dare. And if you go any further, you wouldn't be *you* anymore? You'd be the person who'd done *that*? The places you just can't go.... I think that happened to me tonight."

I thought I knew what he was saying. "Screw her, you mean?" I said.

He rammed a knuckle hard against my temple, and twisted it violently. I wondered if I was going to have to fight him — and lose — but after a moment he lowered his hand and moved away from me, making a low, gulping noise.

I looked at him curiously, and I realized that he was crying: his face was scarlet; snot and tears ran down his cheeks. Vic was sobbing in the street, as unselfconsciously and heartbreakingly as a little boy. He walked away from me then, shoulders heaving, and he hurried down the road so he was in front of me and I could no longer see his face. I wondered what had occurred in that upstairs room to make him behave like that, to scare him so, and I could not even begin to guess.

The streetlights came on, one by one; Vic stumbled on ahead, while I trudged down the street behind him in the dusk, my feet treading out the measure of a poem that, try as I might, I could not properly remember and would never be able to repeat.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

WITH WINTER SETTING IN, we've stocked our larders with a variety of goods — you're sure to find something to your taste here.

Readers who have a hankering for more of Matthew Hughes's stories about Guth Bandar, intrepid noönaut, will find a feast awaiting them. Next month we'll bring you the conclusion of Guth's current adventure sequence — or part one of that story anyway. "The Hero and His Helper" will run in the next two issues and we think yer gonna love it.

Also slated for our February issue is "Brain Raid," a clever tale of rogue AIs in the near-future, courtesy of Alexander Jablokov.

Other items in our pantry include a taste of corporate life by M. K. Hobson, a healthy sampling of Hollywood zaniness from Ron Goulart, William Browning Spencer's tribute to Robert E. Howard, and lots lots more. Just send in the subscription card or subscribe at *www.fsfmag.com* and you'll be all set for winter — and the rest of the year as well.

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Our stories often need to bear "Don't try this at home" warnings. In this case, however, we're happy to encourage readers to take up cross-country running. But if you find yourself facing a course like the one described in this story, well, don't say we didn't warn you...

X-Country

By Robert Reed

THE NEW FELLOW NEVER talked about himself much, and details came out in little dribbles. But he mentioned having once been a teenager in the hill country — a stretch of poor farms and limestone bluffs about an hour north of town. He had a favorite few tales about running cross-country for the local high school: His Phys Ed teacher first saw his potential and egged him into running competitively. Without training and with a naturally lousy sense of pace, the recruit managed to finish dead last for a desperately weak team. But after another year of growth and three thousand miles underfoot, he became a powerful Senior. Laughing at his own misfortunes, our new friend claimed that he could have enjoyed a spectacular year, except that on the eve of the season's first race he got a wicked case of shin splints and he didn't run another two steps until after the State Championship was in the books.

Kip Logan was his name, as far as anybody can tell. A few of us — our most imaginative/paranoid citizens — still liked to dwell on the gaps and little question marks in his personal history. For instance, nobody felt

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quite sure where Kip was before he came to live with us, or what he did, or how he made his money. Nobody could remember him mentioning parents or any siblings of consequence, and nobody ever stepped forward to say yes, they knew him as a boy. But then again, doesn't everybody have gaps and incongruities in their life story? Think about it: You would be hard-pressed to write the definitive biography of your very best friend. And Kip was never more than a close acquaintance to any of us. Besides, his hometown nearly died when its quarries were shut down, and a year later, the county consolidated its schools, boarding up his old high school in the process.

Whoever Kip was, he always acted like a genuinely friendly fellow, throwing out big smiles while speaking to us with slow, pleasant tones. As a general rule, people didn't consider him particularly bright. But everybody has to wonder now. When we talk about him, we always seem to mention how careful he was. The man never boasted about his successes, and he never lectured to us, and I am the only person who can remember him knowing anything that you wouldn't think he would know. Even after a lifetime spent running, he happily claimed to be helpless when it came to calculating a reliable pace time.

Talking about himself, Kip Logan always used excessively humble tones. And frankly, his physical appearance helped this illusion of simplicity: He was tall and pretty-boy handsome, with long legs that carried a muscled body and a pair of shoulders far broader than typical for a quality distance runner. A lifetime of wind and sun had barely abused his skin, which was gold in the summer and ruddy-chalk in the depths of winter. His hair was thick and exceptionally blond. Yet he openly admitted that a portion of that rich mane was artificial. Male-pattern baldness had cropped up a few years ago, and he'd patched the gaps with an implanted carpet. As for his age, I think it's safe to say that Kip looked like a youthful man-child of forty or forty-one. In other words, he was a spectacularly well-preserved creature greatly enjoying his middle fifties.

I've spoken to a few local race directors about old Kip. Entry forms have certain mandatory details: You supply your name and address, phone numbers and T-shirt size. And you have to admit your age on race day, plus give your date of birth. Why both figures are necessary, I'm not sure. Maybe it's to keep clumsy liars out of the mix. But I've studied a few of

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Kip's old entry forms, and in every case, the man was precisely twenty-three days younger than me.

Whenever we raced, Kip beat me, and not just by a little bit. Which meant that he had a chokehold on our age group, plus all of the gift certificates and little gold-painted medals that come with that rarified distinction.

Waivers are another common feature in race entries. And there is always a single line at the bottom where you supply your signature and the date. To what degree a waiver matters, I don't know. I've endured in some horrendously organized events, and if somebody had died because of the lousy traffic control or the lack of paramedics, I'm sure somebody else's ass would have been sued, regardless of any name scribbled as an afterthought.

For thirty-some years, I have run competitive races, and easily, Kip's waiver was the best that I've ever read:

"Cross country is a brutal sport meant for self-abusive personalities," he wrote, "and I, the undersigned, am a major-league idiot for trying this damned thing. If anything bad should happen to me, and it probably will, I have nobody to blame but my stupid self. And with that in mind, I promise to expect the unexpected, and I will tolerate the miserable, and if I die on the course, I would prefer to be buried exactly where I fall...."

Kip told it this way: After thirty-five years spent in other places, he came home again. By home, he didn't mean the town where he grew up, since that tiny crossroads had just about expired. No, he moved to our city, purchasing a baby mansion on the rich-person's boulevard. Paying for it in cash, one persistent rumor would claim. Where that money came from was always a puzzler. On occasion, Kip mentioned working overseas for some obscure Dutch corporation. Malaysia and Brazil played roles in the occasional aside. And more than once, he muttered a few words about investments in real estate and stocks, smiling in a beguiling fashion whenever he admitted, "My guesses did a little bit better than average."

Kip was an immediate force in the local running scene. He entered every race at our end of the state, always placing among the top ten or fifteen males — a tremendous achievement for a citizen who could see Social Security looming. He worked out with the fast groups as well as

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linking up with a few notable talents who usually trained by themselves. And he began showing up at track club meetings and our various social functions. During that first year, he simultaneously dated two young women — gazelles nearly as fast on their feet as he was. As for employment, Kip seemed to lack both the time and the need. He wasn't retired so much as he was incredibly busy with the disciplined life of an eternal athlete. Hard runs were woven around sessions in the weight room, plus he was a regular in both yoga and pilates classes. His diet was rich with nuts and green leaves, and he never drank more than half a beer. And where our local twenty-five-year-old stallions were a grim, brutally competitive lot, Kip seemed utterly at ease with himself. Wearing his boyish zest along with a killer wardrobe, he liked to drive around town in a BMW — a convertible, of course — waving at his many good acquaintances while the blond hair rippled in the wind.

I would confess to feeling envious of Kip, but "envy" doesn't do my complicated feelings justice.

And I liked the man. Always.

So far as I know, I was first to hear about Kip's cross-country race. He'd been living with us for nearly fourteen months. On Thursdays, half a dozen old dogs would meet up at Calley Lake to run tempos. It was two miles to the lap, and a good tempo is supposed to be twenty seconds a mile slower than your honest 10K pace. Kip and I decided to do three miles. A lap and a half. He finished at least ninety seconds ahead of me. By the time I reached the mark, he was breathing normally, smiling happily, offering me a buoyant "Good job" as I staggered to a halt beside him.

It was a hot afternoon in May. I needed water, and he drank a little sip from the fountain, as if to be polite. Then we started trotting that last mile around the lake, heading back for the starting line and the younger forty-something runners who were already finishing their four miles.

Kip was capable of an innocent, almost goofy smile.

Something about the blue eyes and that endless grin made people believe there wasn't much inside his pretty-boy head. "A blond with implants," was the often-heard joke. And his voice was usually slow and careful, as if his words needed to be examined, singly and together, before any sentence could be shown to the world.

"Don," he said to me. "I'm thinking about holding a race."

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"Yeah?" I said.

"An X-country race."

He said it that way. "X" as in the letter, and then "country."

"Cross-country?" I asked.

He didn't say yes or no. Instead, he let his big smile get bigger and the blue eyes dreamier, and staring off into the watery distance, he told me, "At my old stomping grounds. On the trails outside Enderville. What do you think?"

"When?"

"This October," he said. "If there's a free weekend."

Our local marathon was at the beginning of November, and there was a tune-up 15K four weeks earlier. But those other weekends were probably available.

"Sounds like fun," I allowed.

"I hope it sounds fun." Then he glanced at me. "You know, I just had an idea. Just this minute."

I didn't believe him. Something about his manner felt false. Although why that was and why I remember a detail like that, I don't know. And besides, what did it matter when he actually dreamed up anything?

"I'll have to map out a course," he said.

I didn't know the hill country. But I'd driven past it on occasion, and from the highway, those bluffs seemed brutally rough.

"Prize money," he said. "What do you think?"

"It's up to you."

"As an incentive," he explained.

"Are you going to run the race yourself?" I asked.

"I shouldn't, no." Laughing quietly, he pointed out, "I'll have too much to do just running the finish line."

That was welcome news. I told Kip, "Prize money would be an exceptionally good thing."

"How much?"

"As much as you can afford," I suggested, working hard to sound as if I might, just might, be kidding.

Kip had a huge box of entry forms printed up, and he asked some of the quicker runners to help put them on windshields after the Sassafras 5K.

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I agreed, but as it happened, my right hip — my touchy hip — started hurting during the second mile, pulling me back into the middle of the pack. By the time I finished, I was limping, and by the time I found Kip, the chore was done.

"Ice," Kip suggested, noting my rocking gait.

I nodded and then consciously ignored his advice. My little Hyundai had a piece of gold paper tucked under one wiper. "First Annual Hill-Hell Run," it read. Unfolding it, I found the disclaimer and had a good laugh. Then I noticed the prize money, and my first thought was that my slow-witted buddy was an exceptionally bad proofreader.

"Oh, no," he told me. "The amounts are correct."

We were standing among the other finishers, watching the Sassafras Awards being handed out. Smacking the entry form with a fingertip, I asked, "Do you mean this? Two hundred dollars cash for an age-group winner?"

He shrugged. "I want runners at my starting line."

"Oh, you're going to have them," I said. "And two thousand dollars for winning the whole show?"

He flashed a big smile my way. Maybe I'm remembering it wrong, but something was lurking in those eyes — a sharpness revealed for a half-instant — and then his expression instantly turned back to beach-boy simple.

"Two grand?" I repeated. "With prize money to tenth place?"

Shrugging, Kip pointed out, "There won't be any double awards, so the wealth's going to be shared."

In other words, the top ten finishers, male and female, would be yanked from age-group consideration. Of course two hundred dollars wouldn't make any difference in my life. But the idea of winning that tidy sum for being the fastest fifty-something...well, it was a delicious promise. I was still grinning when the Sassafras race director called out Kip's name. Once again, he had won our age-group, and for his achievement, Kip earned the privilege of walking up front to receive a coin-sized medal dangling on the end of a cheap ribbon, plus a gift certificate for fifteen dollars off his next pair of running shoes.

What made the moment memorable was the audience: A sudden silence descended, followed by a few quiet whispers. Then the applause

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came, but it wasn't the light, polite applause that follows pleasantly contrived moments like these. What I heard was hard clapping accompanied by shouts, one of the young stallions throwing his arms high in the air, calling out, "Kipper! Kip, my man! My buddy! Kip, Kipper!"

MY HIP IMPROVED, and I started building my mileage again. But old bodies don't relish sudden change or too much ambition. I sputtered in early September, and then managed a brief recovery. But my comeback collapsed during the fifth mile of the Classic 15K. My hip was screaming, and for the first time in thirty years, I gave up, accepting a humiliating ride back to the finish line. The next morning, I saw the first in a series of increasingly expensive doctors, ending up sitting on the end of an exam table while an expert on joint disease — a young woman barely in her thirties — calmly explained what was wrong with me and what she proposed to do about it.

"Titanium," I heard, followed by the words, "You are a lucky man."

"Lucky? How?" I asked.

"Our new hips are quite reliable," she promised. "Under normal conditions, you can expect twenty or thirty years of use. And of course there's always the chance that new materials will come onto the market. Bioceramics. Or perhaps, living hips grown from your own bone tissue."

"I'm fifty-three."

But she didn't understand my point. With a professional grin and minimal charm, she explained, "We don't need to operate in the near-future. Anti-inflammatories and a change of habits should delay surgery for a year, perhaps eighteen months. Depending on your personal tolerances, of course."

"I am fifty-three years old," I repeated.

She blinked. "Pardon — ?"

"I'll never run again," I blurted. "That's what you're telling me. Maybe we'll be growing hips like corn in another twenty years, but by then, I'll be in my seventies and desperately out of shape."

"Oh, but you'll still be able to ride a bike and swim, and you can use a low-impact exercise machinery, within limits."

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"I know old runners with artificial joints," I said. "They always try to bike and swim. But they gain weight anyway, and they lose their fitness, and regardless of age, they become fat old people."

The doctor had no canned answers at the ready. She looked at the bright screen before her, studying an assortment of images of naked bones and a single decaying socket. Then with fingers to her lips, she added, "You know, Don...other than this one sad hip, you're in excellent condition for a gentleman of your age...."

Upon hearing my news, runners had a standard reaction. Surprise and uncamouflaged horror swept across their faces, and probably feeling aches inside their own hips, they would blurt the same reflexive words.

"You'll be back."

Their hope was delivered with an identical tone of voice, reflexively optimistic and minimally informed. The only exception was Kip. Watching my limping approach, he pointed out, "You've got a hitch in your giddy-up." And when he heard my plight, he didn't wince or even touch his own hip. He was immune to my pain, nodding while assuring me, "It could be worse news, of course."

"Worse how?" I asked.

But that was too obvious to say. Putting on his pretty-boy smile, Kip said, "But then again, who knows what the future holds?"

I had already entered Kip's race. But as a rule, I hate standing by, watching runners in action. I've always been a creature of motion; at least that's what my personal mythology claims. And several times, Kip assured me that he didn't need help. He'd already laid out his course through the forested bluffs, painting the trails with orange arrows and setting up stations at four key points. Runners would search for coolers of water and buckets full of numbered Popsicle sticks. Four sticks had to be retrieved, brought back in order to prove that the full route had been conquered. Everyone would carry a map, and since he'd closed off entries at five hundred, he still had plenty of time left to make race bibs and see to any other last-minute details.

"So you don't want my help?" I asked.

The smile was bright and imbecilic. Quietly, he conceded, "I don't

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need it. But I suppose you could pull race tags, if too many bodies come in too fast."

I woke up that morning believing that I'd find something else to do. But after coffee, I was driving north, eventually passing through a tiny river-bottom hamlet where an old brick high school stood empty. A handmade sign had been set up three miles past Enderville. "Hill-Hell Run," it said, pointing me toward the bluffs. Cars were parked up and down a country road. I had to turn around and take one of the last slots. Limping, I slowly covered a quarter-mile of loose gravel, ending up where an abandoned farmstead stood in a bowl-shaped valley, surrounded on three sides by steep limestone hills and mature forest. By then, the runners had gathered behind a long white line, faces stared at a wall of oaks and ash trees that were turning color after the first cold nights of the season. Every other hand was holding a slip of gold paper — the promised maps. "Good luck to you," Kip shouted. Then he clapped two boards together, and the youngest runners threw themselves into a desperate sprint, fighting to be first into the towering woods.

When five hundred runners vanish, the silence can be unnerving.

I limped my way over to my friend. He offered me a little wink and one of two folding chairs waiting next to a large digital clock and a second, much shorter strip of white paint.

"The finish line?" I asked.

He nodded, adding, "The finishers come in from there." He was pointing in the opposite direction from where the pack had gone.

"Have a spare map?"

"On the table," he said.

A row of shoeboxes was on top of a small folding table, each box empty except for two or three unused race packets. I fished out my own packet and glanced at my bib number — 8 — then opened the accompanying map. The racecourse was shown as a thin red line lain over the photocopy of a topographic map. Four times, the runner would move out to a distant station, pick up his Popsicle stick and then come back again. The race headed upriver and then came back again, the second leg following a snaking tributary. Then it returned again, taking an entirely different path upriver; and down it came again, the final station waiting on the outskirts of Enderville. The entire course created a long, flattened X. And what

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impressed me was how exceptionally complicated every leg looked: I was sitting there, calm and rested. Yet I was having trouble following all the loops and side loops and the dozen or so places where trails crossed one another.

Very quietly, I asked Kip, "What is all this?"

"My course map," he replied.

The smile hadn't left his face.

"You're serious," I said. And when he didn't rise to defend himself, I asked, "What did people say about this map?"

"Many words. Not many of them complimentary."

I could imagine the scene.

"But as I explained it to the runners, there's plenty of help along the way. I marked the course. Where the trails cross, I put down arrows. Easy to see, very easy to follow."

"While racing?" I asked.

The smile brightened even more.

"If I was running at full speed," I said, "charging through the woods, in the shadows, up and down hills...and then I came to this intersection...." I pointed at a tangle of lines. "Which way would I go?"

"It depends," he said.

"On what?"

"Well, you would have to follow the first arrow that I painted."

I stared at Kip for a long while. From high in the hills, we heard yelling and then an incoherent young voice, male and furious. That's when I finally asked, "How would I know which arrow was the first arrow?"

Kip didn't answer.

"Are they different colors? Are they labeled? What?"

But he didn't seem particularly interested in the topic. Standing up abruptly, he turned. I hadn't heard any noise, but he must have. To somebody still not visible, he said, "Over here. I'm over here."

One of his ex-girlfriends emerged from the shadows. Half our age and perfectly fit, she was lovely and she was fuming. With a voice verging on a scream, she reported, "There's barely a trail up there. Kip? Kip? I thought you had this all figured out."

To her and to me, he said, "I do."

"Bullshit," she told him.

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He said nothing.

Then one of the young stallions emerged from the opposite end of the clearing. "Hey, Kipper," he began, one hand wiping at a ragged cut on his bloody forearm. "People are wandering around everywhere, Kipper. They're lost, and they're pissed. It's a mess up there!"

The race director shrugged his broad shoulders. Then he sat down again, and the two competitors turned back into the trees. A few more curses drifted over us, wandering in from random directions. Finally Kip turned to me, still smiling, saying, "X," with a soft, careful voice.

"Huh?" I muttered.

"In mathematics," he told me, "it is the symbol for quantities unknown."

I offered a weak nod. Nothing more.

"Do you know why?" He winked, explaining, "That great old mathematician, Descartes, wrote *La Géométrie.* His original manuscript was full of equations using *a, b,* and *c* for what is known. While *x, y,* and z represented mystery numbers. But when the book was being typeset, the printer didn't have enough of *y*s and *z*s for all of the equations. So he mostly used the *x,* which is where the time-honored convention first began."

I said, "Huh," again.

"X," he said, making crossed line in the grass between his feet. "The symbol is one of the first marks made by any child, if only by accident. And it surely must have been one of the earliest geometric forms drawn by ancient hominids. Don't you think so?"

"I guess — "

"On a treasure map, doesn't the X lead us to the pirates' chest?" Kip glanced at me, asking, "More than anything, what would you like to find? If you had a shovel and map, I mean. If you could dig deep and uncover any possible wonder...?"

I hesitated. Suddenly I was sitting with a person I didn't know, his language and smart voice taking me by surprise. In vain, I tried to conjure up some worthy response. Or better, I wanted to find some way to ask my friend to explain his sudden, unique transformation.

But there wasn't time. Moments later, half a dozen runners plunged out into the open. They were coming from a third direction — a line of

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scrawny people bathed in sweat and adrenaline. Judging by their body language, the angriest member had claimed the task of trotting up to Kip. "Will you give us some help here?" he cried out. "This isn't fair."

Kip took off his smile. Underneath his chair was a gray metal box. He calmly opened it and reached in, removing six twenty-dollar bills. "Fifteen for the entry fee, and five dollars for your gas and trouble. Does that sound fair?"

The runners stopped short. One woman had a deep gash on her knee, while the man in back looked as if he had fallen down an entire hillside. They glanced at each other, measuring moods. Then each took the offered bill and started jogging back to their cars.

Waiting inside that box were twin stacks of new twenties.

Kip had come here knowing exactly what would happen, and he was ready for it. I don't know what startled me more: That this elaborate disaster had been anticipated, or that this man with whom I had run for more than a year had suddenly shown me an interest in, if not a true talent for, mathematics, and perhaps for skills that were even stranger.

FOUR HUNDRED and eighty-seven runners had started the race, and remarkably, nearly seventy of them eventually returned to the finish line, each having delivered the necessary four Popsicle sticks marked with their bib number. But even among those finishers, there were controversies and sour looks. The fastest runner in the group — a twenty-three-year-old ex-University star — had gotten profoundly lost. He'd circled Enderville at least twice before stumbling over the last station, and by the time he sprinted home, he won nothing but second place in his age group and sixty-fifth overall.

"This isn't right," he chanted throughout the awards ceremony.

The first male was a stocky fellow in his middle forties — a self-made expert in tracking and wilderness survival who admitted that he had ignored the various game trails that Kip had used, preferring to follow his instincts overland. The top woman was his eleven-year-old daughter — a bright beaming girl more thrilled by the silver trophy than by any bland check for a thousand dollars.

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From what I could tell, speed had nothing to do with the finishing order.

Luck was what mattered. And persistence. Maturity was also a positive, since the majority of the finishers were my age or older — back-of-the-pack joggers who attacked the course as a morning-long adventure.

One graybeard held a rag to his face, mopping up the blood streaming from a tangle of thorn cuts. "You're the lucky one," he told me. "You didn't have to go up there."

I was feeling lucky, but only to a point.

"Next year?" asked the male champion. "Is there going to be a Second Annual Hill-Hell Run?"

But Kip never quite replied. He looked at us, his brain probably formulating an empty answer, and then half a hundred voices screamed together, everyone laughing painfully, begging, "No way, please God, no!"

After that, like gas under pressure, everyone dispersed. Kip crammed his gear into the little BMW — everything, that is, but the cooler and buckets of Popsicle sticks — and then he drove me back to my car.

"Thanks for the help, Don," he told me.

I tried to find encouraging words. But the man didn't act concerned about how he looked to the world. He was smiling like a maniac, and all I could think of saying was, "Later."

With a last little wink, he lied to me. "Soon," he said. And with a little wave and a flash of blond hair, Kip was gone.

I drove home, leaving my athletic life in storage.

Over those next days and weeks, with my hip aching and the rest of my body feeling ancient, I considered what kind of treasure I'd like to dig up on a tropical beach. A new hip, sure, and maybe a couple new legs too. And then, almost against my will, I discovered that the average day is full of fertile time when you cannot run. What astonished me most was how quickly I grew accustomed to being crippled and how much I looked forward to my doctors' appointments.

I planned to ride my bike during the November marathon, but it was a cold, raw morning, and I overslept, waking up late and without a hint of regret.

The Monday paper had the usual stories about the race. But the big

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story, at least for me, was in the Tuesday paper: One of our local runners had felt sick before the marathon, but he ran anyway. He was a big fellow whom I knew by name — one of the top ten finishers at Kip's race. With a terrific bellyache, he managed to chug and walk his way up to the boulevard between the three- and four-mile marks. As it happened, the top cardiac surgeon in the state was standing on his front lawn, sipping green tea while cheering on the competitors, and the foolhardy runner staggered to a halt in front of him and collapsed, stricken with a massive coronary.

If the man had dropped a block earlier or a block later, he would have died.

But the surgeon did everything perfectly, and the runner was in the hospital, but he was going to survive his stupidity. Accompanying the article was a photograph of that very unlikely place where an appointment with death had been missed. Kip's baby mansion was standing in the background. And sitting on the front lawn, plain to see, was a FOR SALE BY OWNER sign, over which somebody had painted the single word: SOLD.

Kip Logan had moved away and nobody knew just where. But the general assumption, at least among the running community, was that he had been so embarrassed by his fiasco that moving was the least awful solution, followed closely by a tidy suicide.

Except I knew that Kip hadn't been embarrassed. Much less mortified or wracked by any appealing sense of guilt.

The annual track club meeting came in January, and with a sense that this might be the last time, I went to eat pizza and boast about old glories. Everybody seemed pleased to see me, and everybody seemed distracted. At first, I was a little bit hurt by the collective indifference. Few asked about my hip, and no one thought to throw any casual encouragement my way. The subject of the evening was one of Kip's ex-girlfriends. On Christmas, she ate too much and got sick, and when she went to her doctor, a routine test identified that she was suffering from routine food poisoning as well as a profoundly cancerous liver.

A mere week later, a healthy donor liver was found, and the transplant was a complete success.

"She was lucky," said everybody sitting at my table, and presumably everybody at every other table too.

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The man on my right asked, "If she hadn't gotten sick when she did, what would have happened?"

We nodded grimly, knowing her likely fate.

Then without understanding the full significance, I mentioned, "You know, she ran Kip's race." Both of his ex-girlfriends had competed, but she wasn't the angry one. In the end, she had finished as the fifth-place woman, pocketing five hundred dollars and keeping her four Popsicle sticks as a memento. Nodding, I mentioned to everyone in earshot, "This is a funny, strange coincidence."

Most of them didn't see my point.

I reminded them about the heart attack on the marathon, and then pointed out, "Two people have had their lives spared. By luck. And both of them happened to have finished the Hill-Hell Run."

Uneasy laughter turned to paranoid silence.

Then someone up the table named the father-daughter who won the race. And with a sad tone, she added, "I don't know if you'd call it luck, what happened to them...."

"What happened?" I asked.

The graybeard across from me leaned closer. "His wife, her mom...she was killed in a big wreck last week. Out on the Interstate."

A vague memory tugged.

"Their car was crushed between semis," he told me.

I remembered news footage showing a twisted and mangled Jeep.

Then another voice called out, telling us, "They were there too. He was driving, and his daughter was sitting behind him — "

The room was falling silent.

"Both walked away from the crash. The mom was dead, but they were unharmed. That's what I heard. Barely a mark on either one of them."

It took another four weeks for me to make up my mind. And even then, I was playing games with myself. I drove up north with the intention of poking around Enderville, talking to the last of the locals and perhaps seeing if I could look at any of the old school records. Did a boy named Kip Logan ever attend that high school? I wanted to find out. Or was the whole business just one elaborate lie, told by somebody I would never see again?

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During the drive, all sorts of wild speculations occurred to me. But when I hit Main Street, I realized that I really didn't care if Kip Logan was real. It was still early in the morning. A dusting of fresh snow had fallen on six inches of old stuff. I drove past the empty high school and upriver to the equally empty farmstead, parking as close to the starting line as possible. Then I put on the last pair of running shoes that I'd ever buy, and I fixed a belt around my waist, little bottles full of water and Gatorade. I put on the race bib that had been sitting on the car floor for these last months. That might just matter; who knew? And with a mangled copy of the unreadable map in my hand, I limped my way to the starting line.

"Don't worry, Gretel. We can follow the subscription cards from this magazine back home."

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CURIOSITIES

LOVE IS FOREVER – WE ARE FOR TONIGHT, BY ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS (1970)

CURTIS Books blurbed *Love Is Forever—We Are for Tonight* as "THE STRANGE AND FANTASTIC NOVEL OF A MAN TRAPPED IN AN INNER WORLD OF FEAR AND EVIL." It is, in truth, the autobiographical psychiatric case study of pulp sf writer Robert Moore Williams (1907-77). Think latter-day Heinlein crossed with L. Ron Hubbard and you won't go too far wrong.

The beginning place is early last-century Farmington, Missouri. But we are soon swept away on what the author himself calls a subvocal thought stream. Dianetics, UFOlogy, pre- and ante-natal memories ("Yes," a lawyer told Williams. "Yes. My mother's milk was poison to me."), desert communes, hallucinogenic gases ("I see Saturn in a cocked hat!"), Celtic melancholia, enemas, color projection instruments, and the italicized *awareness of awareness center.* I wouldn't be one bit surprised if Philip K. Dick had read this book long before he began *VALIS.*

Williams wrote some novels that deserve to be a lot more than little-known. *The Blue Atom* (1958) was inspired by his drug-induced view of the Solar System swimming in a soft blue light. *The Day They H-Bombed Los Angeles* (1962) is worthy of special praise; there's a clever catch in that catchpenny title. But *Love Is Forever — We Are for Tonight* captures his surely unique blend of madness and/or vision in its simon-pure form.

Semi-explanatory extract: "Our emotions remember the time before the beginning. *Always* is a meaningful word to them. Love is forever. But we children of ephemera, we are for tonight."

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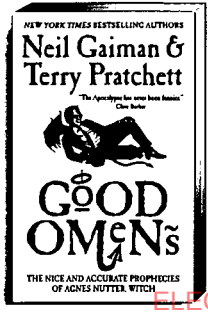
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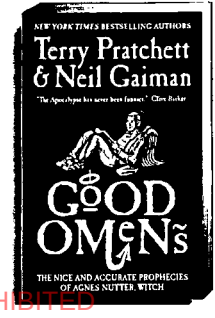
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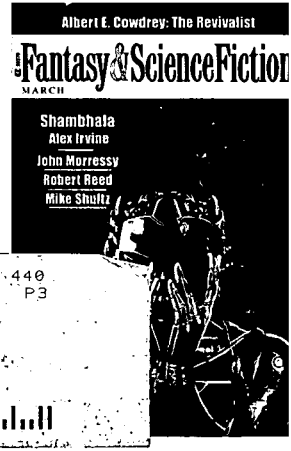

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